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"I have no place that I may claim" – Intersecting Race, Gender and Class: An Analysis of Amma Asante's *Belle*

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Abstract

Belle (2014), directed by Amma Asante, is a heritage style film about the life of Dido Elizabeth Belle, a late eighteenth-century aristocrat born of the illegitimate union of a black slave mother and a white English father. This dissertation aims to fill the gaps in the scarce literature about the film, which often focuses more on the history which inspired it, and less on the narrative purposes of the work. Moreover, I entail a conjunctural analysis of *Belle* according to theories such as Crenshaw's Intersectionality and Bakhtin's concept of the threshold chronotope. The latter inspired my creation of the concept of threshold identity. Crucially, identity is at the centre of my analysis as it pertains to labels like race, class and gender and, as I argue, drives the story of *Belle*. In conducting my study of the film, I begin by discussing the film's genre, and particular characteristics. The bulk of this thesis is devoted to an in-depth analysis of *Belle* in terms of narrative, mainly through visual elements, references and techniques. What is more, representation and painting are addressed, as the film was inspired by a portrait of Dido Belle, and different paintings and other visual works are used by the filmmakers to convey the conflict in the narrative. Finally, I relate the creation of *Belle* with the current British context, as the film highlights central social problems of the age and provides alternate images of Englishness in a society still clinging to a nostalgic past.

Keywords: *Belle*, Heritage Film, Intersectionality, Threshold Identity

Resumo

Belle (2014), realizado por Amma Asante, é um filme de estilo *heritage* sobre a vida de Dido Elizabeth Belle, uma aristocrata de final do século XVIII fruto da união ilegítima de uma mãe escrava negra e de um pai branco inglês. Esta dissertação visa preencher as lacunas da literatura escassa sobre o filme, que se costuma focar mais nos factos históricos que o inspiraram, e menos nos propósitos narrativos do mesmo. Para além disto, procedo a uma análise conjuntural de *Belle*, baseando-me em teorias como a da Intersecionalidade segundo Kimberlé Crenshaw ("Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics") e o conceito do cronótopo do limiar de Mikhail Bakhtin (*The Dialogic Imagination*). Esta última noção inspirou a minha criação do conceito de identidade de limiar, que se refere a um estado complexo em que um indivíduo não consegue pertencer inteiramente a um grupo devido às suas circunstâncias identitárias. Esta noção vem no seguimento de outras noções teóricas como a de *double conscioussnes* de Du Bois ("Strivings of the Negro People").

A identidade está, deste modo, no centro da minha análise no que se refere a rótulos como raça, classe e género, cuja intersecção, como defendo, impulsiona a história de *Belle*. Ao estudar o filme, começo por discutir o seu género, e as suas características particulares. Sendo que, apesar de aparentar ser um típico filme *heritage*, *Belle* encontra-se na intersecção de diferentes tradições cinematográficas, como *women's cinema* e *black cinema*, sendo que na literatura sobre cinema não existe sobreposição ou interseção destas diferentes categorias. Procuro então elucidar como *Belle* põe em causa preconceitos sobre o cinema *heritage* inglês, ao escolher uma heroína negra digna de uma obra de Jane Austen. Neste contexto cultural, Dido não só se encontra numa posição limiar em termos raciais, como, sendo uma herdeira, também se afasta economicamente do estereótipo feminino da época. *Belle* inclui igualmente o tráfico de escravos na narrativa, sendo que Lord Mansfield, o tio-avô que adotou Dido e a sua prima, encontra-se prestes a julgar o caso do navio negreiro Zong, cujo proprietários procuram obter uma compensação monetária por escravos que foram atirados ao mar por motivo de doença. A discussão sobre as implicações éticas da escravatura é por isso importante em *Belle*, e acaba por aproximar Dido ao seu futuro marido, John Davinier, devido às posições abolicionistas deste. Estas especificidades tornam *Belle* um filme de limiar. Com o objetivo de compreender a importância de Dido Belle no século XVIII e do filme *Belle* no século

XXI, apresento uma contextualização sociocultural, de modo a elucidar, por exemplo, as atitudes de personagens como a família Ashford, que demonstram ter preconceitos raciais e de género contra Dido e a sua prima branca, Elizabeth. Inicialmente, Dido é considerada como um objeto sexual, enquanto que Elizabeth é vista como uma jovem virginal. Mais tarde, quando a herança de Dido e a pobreza de Elizabeth são reveladas, Dido torna-se cobiçada como futura esposa e Elizabeth vê-se rejeitada socialmente.

Assim sendo, dou início a uma análise aprofundada de *Belle* em termos de narrativa, principalmente por meio de elementos visuais, referências intertextuais e técnicas cinematográficas. Baseando-me em noções de Bakhtin e Field, apresento duas trilogias de cenas em *Belle*, que representam a evolução da narrativa e da personagem principal (a "Mirror Trilogy", e a "Crisis Trilogy"). Aqui relaciono a noção de necessidade dramática de Field (*Screenplay* 25) com a metamorfose de Bakhtin (*The Dialogic Imagination* 115). Field propõe que o conflito dramático, que necessitará de uma resolução, acontece quando uma personagem procurar alcançar um objetivo ao qual se apresentam obstáculos. De modo semelhante, Bakhtin afirma que a metamorfose é essencial para o "renascimento" do indivíduo, sendo que esta acontece devido a uma crise que impulsiona uma mudança. No caso de *Belle*, a necessidade dramática apresenta-se como o desejo de Dido de pertencer ou ser aceite. Quando confrontada com uma crise identitária, Dido terá de procurar alterar a sua perspetiva de modo a superar obstáculos. Na narrativa de *Belle*, destaco como obstáculos ou crises, uma repulsa de Dido em relação a si própria devido à discriminação racial que a rodeia, e as expetativas sociais de género que ditam a vida das mulheres no século XVIII.

A representação e a arte também são abordadas nesta dissertação, dado que o filme foi inspirado por um retrato de Dido Belle, e diferentes pinturas e outras obras visuais são usadas pelas cineastas para transmitir o conflito na narrativa. É relevante apontar que identifico estas obras visuais e literárias inseridas em *Belle*, algo aparentemente inédito na literatura sobre o filme. Especificamente, identifiquei as duas pinturas de Sir Joshua Reynolds usadas no filme como referências à posição de Dido: *Lady Elizabeth Keppel and a Servant* (ca. 1762) e *Charles Stanhope, third Earl of Harrington, and a Servant* (1782). Também apontei o uso do emblema abolicionista de Josiah Wedgwood como referência visual no filme, e identifiquei o título do livro que a personagem de Dido lê como *The Dying Negro: A Poetical Epistle* (1773). As três referências visuais acima referidas são utilizadas em *Belle* como um espelho no qual Dido vê-se refletida, e graças

ao qual o público observa a posição subordinada de uma mulher negra na era imperial. Ainda assim, Dido admite não saber exatamente onde se encaixa quando, ao ler *The Dying Negro*, revela não se sentir verdadeiramente representada na obra. O facto de Dido encontrar-se no limiar de várias categorias é também explorado em *Belle* graças a uma subversão de estereótipos raciais. Numa cena reminiscente de Austen, Dido toca piano numa *soirée* em Kenwood, a casa da sua família. Para espanto dos convidados, Dido toca uma peça clássica com grande talento, enquanto a sua prima causa menos impacto com a sua actuação. Além disto, o símbolo da rosa inglesa, associada à pureza e à castidade brancas, de acordo com a personagem James Ashford, é paradoxalemnte atribuido a Dido, estando presente no seu guarda-roupa e em seu redor. Outra escolha cinematográfica de relevância é a representação do cabelo de Dido, em contradição com o retrato original, já que na pintura original ela usa um turbante. Como demonstro através de um estudo da representação artística no século XVIII, era raro o cabelo de uma personagem feminina negra estar exposto. Devido a isto, o filme parece contrariar esta tendência ao não censurar o cabelo encaracolado de Dido, e mostrá-lo como símbolo de beleza.

O fio condutor da dissertação é a exploração identitária em *Belle*, a qual elucido recorrendo a autores como Frantz Fanon e bell hooks. A noção de identidade limiar é assim crucial, já que esta implica um conflito causado por um sistema hegemónico baseado em categorias impermeáveis – um sistema através do qual a hierarquia social do século XVIII foi-se construindo até ao presente. Finalmente, relaciono a criação de *Belle* com o contexto britânico atual, ao mostrar como o filme destaca problemas sociais centrais da época e fornece imagens alternativas de *Englishness* numa sociedade ainda agarrada a uma nostalgia do passado. Graças à sua aparência de *heritage film*, *Belle* consegue introduzir perguntas profundas sobre a sociedade e cultura inglesas, ao explorar as consequências dum *status quo* pouco flexível. Em última instância, concluo que, assim como Amin Maalouf (*Les Identités Meutrières*) e Fanon (*Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*) defendem, a identidade individual, por mais complexa que seja, não se pode dividir ou amputar.

Palavras-chave: *Belle*, Cinema Heritage, Intersectionalidade, Identidade Limiar

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction

This dissertation has as its main object of analysis the 2014 film *Belle*, directed by Amma Asante and written by Misan Sagay. The film focuses on Dido Elizabeth Belle (1761-1804), a mixed-race English woman living in aristocracy. Based on real events and people, the film introduces the Mansfield family, headed by William Murray, Earl of Mansfield (1705-1793) who was Lord Chief Justice of England. In the film, as in fact, Lord Mansfield and his wife adopted two nieces who were cousins, Elizabeth Murray (1760-1825) and Dido Belle. Dido's father was Captain John Lindsay and her mother a slave named Maria Belle. An illegitimate black girl, Dido was brought up in Kenwood House, in Hampstead, just outside of London.[1] From the beginning, the film pairs Dido with her white blonde cousin, her physically contrasted companion. Through an intersection of identity labels: black and white, slave and lady, English and exotic, Dido, in her own words, seems, to have "no place to claim" (Sagay 91). My aim is to highlight this condition, the impossibility of belonging, as I explore the film in terms of its narrative, genre and overall *mise-en-scène*. Because *Belle* was inspired by an eighteenth-century painting (see fig.1), I also examine the cultural and artistic context of this period and, furthermore, how the twenty-first century film responds to the current day ethos.

This multi-layered study has at its centre the concept of threshold identity, inspired by the threshold chronotope created by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) (*The Dialogic Imagination* 248). Because my main goal is to explore the protagonist's disrupted identity, the threshold is employed as a metaphor which encompasses the problematic of the dissertation: how to find a place of belonging and power in a society where one's identity is complex and stigmatized. The threshold emphasizes the idea of this narrative

[1] For more information on the history which inspired *Belle*, see Houliston and Jenkins (36-41).

journey to overcome obstacles and barriers, in fiction and in reality. This idea is present in the object of analysis and, as such, it is ubiquitous to the different parts of the dissertation. Moreover, the notion of complex identities is relevant for our current cultural landscape where many people are travellers, immigrants or children of different cultures and languages, in our fast-moving world.[2] This complex threshold identity will therefore guide my analysis of *Belle*, as a means of calling attention to (maybe unexpected) continuities between the late eighteenth-century and the present day.

The film uses a real-life event, the Zong massacre, to delve into issues of slavery and societal critique. One of the many slavery related cases in which Lord Mansfield was involved, the Zong was a slave ship which threw overboard 132 West-Africans who were being sold into slavery, thus killing them. After this, insurance was claimed for these slaves as lost cargo (Ward 199). The political discussions surrounding this case were incorporated into the plot of *Belle*, since they are connected to Dido, her future husband John Davinier and Mansfield. Being the first film[3] to depict this event, as far as my research has taken me, academic writing on *Belle* focuses greatly on the judgement of the Zong. However, I will argue that the film is not about the Zong, but as the title implies, about Dido Belle. The amount of critical material on this film is not vast. There are many online articles or papers about *Belle*, however the majority is written from a non-academic perspective. Up until the moment of writing this dissertation, the literature which discusses this film consists of four essays, two of which were originally published in edited collections. I will consider them chronologically.

Published in 2014 in *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, "'Let Justice Be Done Though the Heavens May Fall': The Zong in Amma Asante's

[2] See Croucher, and Block.
[3] The second film to address the Zong is *Mr. Turner* (2014), see Ward for a discussion of it.

Belle" was written by Delaney Smith and Susan Hatters Friedman. This essay is clearly more focused on the legal proceedings of the Zong case than on analysing the film. Nonetheless, the authors, both psychiatrists, give a positive appraisal of the film while arguing that it is not completely historically accurate:

> The movie paints a fascinating portrait of the life of a young woman of privilege and diverse racial background, but it takes many liberties both with the known details of Belle's life and (more important to a forensic audience) Lord Mansfield's famous slavery cases. (531)

Indeed, *Belle* is not always precise in its historical references. For instance, the famous phrases by Lord Mansfield which appear in the film's version of the Zong trial – "the state of slavery is so odious that nothing can be suffered to support it" and "let justice be done, though the heavens may fall" – were in reality uttered in the Somerset case (Byrne 144-145). [4] Although some historical events have been altered to fit the narrative, I argue this is not necessarily a problem since the objective of the film is not to be read as a history book or a documentary but rather as a story about identity and culture. The authors conclude that *Belle* is a compelling film with diverse themes "not only of forensic psychiatric interest, but of class, race, slavery, and gender equality" (532). Even though what can be seen as the intersectionality of gender, race and class in this film is considered important by the two authors, they never delve deeply into it. Smith and Hatters Friedman point to what they consider was Mansfield's more moderate real-life position on slavery and the slave trade, even though the Zong and Somerset cases became "rallying points

[4] The Somerset vs Stewart case (1772) was a Court of King's Bench judgement, in which Lord Mansfield declared that slavery in England and Wales was unsupported by law. See Rabin for an analysis of the famous case.

for abolitionists" (532). Overall, this essay does not adopt a literary or artistic approach, as the authors consider the forensic interest of the film as their target of analysis.

"The Psychosis of Whiteness: The Celluloid Hallucinations of *Amazing Grace* and *Belle*" by Kehinde Andrews was published in 2016, in the *Journal of Black Studies*. With seventeen pages of text, this essay is longer than the previous one, which was shy of three pages. Andrews attempts to tackle the two films mentioned in the title, in relation to the irrationality of the psychosis of whiteness. This perspective is engaging, yet one can find certain inaccuracies in the text. The author often refers to psychosis, a psychiatric pathology, using it in the context of racism and white supremacy. Andrews considers that to live believing in whiteness is "a Eurocentric worldview that produces the privilege of White skin" (Andrews 436), which can be likened to being psychotic or living in psychosis. I challenge the pertinence of the use of this disorder which, as referenced by Andrews, is "hallmarked by delusional thinking and hallucinations" (436). I question if this is the most appropriate analogy to use when addressing *Belle*, considering psychosis is a serious and complex disease where there may be a true break from reality.[5] By claiming that whiteness is a form of psychosis the author seems to ignore how society, the law and the overall hegemonic structure in countries like the United Kingdom, have given privilege to white people.[6] For many, white supremacy is a reality not a hallucination, although the ideas behind this way of thinking are not accurate (Bethencourt 26). Moreover, I think that declaring whiteness as psychosis could support white supremacist theories that claim society is not white enough and should be cleansed of other races, since the meaning of the statement can be easily twisted. We can even

[5] For detailed information see the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013) also known as DSM-5. Psychosis does not exist under this name but rather it would be part of the "Schizophrenia Spectrum and Other Psychotic Disorders", described from page 87 to 122.
[6] I reference the United Kingdom because both *Amazing Grace* and *Belle* are British films depicting events of British history.

imagine how detrimental it could be if white supremacists or racists started to claim they are but mentally ill, using this as an excuse for hate crimes, for example. As will be discussed in the next chapter, I argue that systems of oppression are hegemonic, and thus racism or white supremacy are taken for granted and we may be socialized into adopting these beliefs as natural. Andrews does mention systems of oppression but focuses heavily on the psychosis problem. Because of this, I would think it more relevant for the author to have discussed the socio-cultural construction of whiteness and blackness, what these notions mean and what the relation between them is. Regarding psychology and race, Andrews cites W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) twice. Since this is a central theme of the essay, Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) would also seem crucial as another reference (*Peau Noire* 143-146), yet the author makes no mention of him or his work. Furthermore, the author criticizes orthodox Marxism: "The problem with the new abolitionists is that they are unpinned by the same psychosis of Whiteness as orthodox Marxism, the denial of the central and structural importance of racism" (441). However, in the next paragraph when discussing what influenced the abolition of the slave trade, Andrews seems to adhere to what he criticized: "The slave system had become unworkable for a number of reasons. First, resistance by enslaved Africans made the system increasingly unprofitable, with the Haitian revolution being the catalyst for the abolition of the trade" (441). By stating that economic reasons were behind abolition the author could be accused of "economism" or reducing cultural and societal change to matters of economy.[7] Andrews fails to consider the impact of the Anti-Slavery movement and the publication of slave narratives which helped change public opinion on slavery (Sadler 39-44). Moreover, slavery continued to be incredibly profitable in spite of revolts, so much so, that it was only abolished with compensations paid to the slave owners who would lose their "livelihood" (Olusoga 238).

[7] See page 23 of this dissertation for an explanation of criticism of orthodox Marxism, such as economism, according to Gramsci.

The essay eventually discusses the film *Belle*, although making some mistakes, for example, when the author states: "She [Dido Belle] eventually becomes involved in trying to influence her grandfather's ruling in the case of the slave ship Zong, but she is convinced to do this by her fictional love interest in the film, John Davinier, who works tirelessly to provide evidence in the case" (444). Dido does not have a goal to influence Mansfield in the film, she is not convinced by Davinier to investigate the case, she is not invited into such discussions. In fact, she finds barriers from both men initially, and it is by her own will that she researches the Zong. Moreover, John Davinier is not a fictional love interest, but the name of the man Dido married in real life (this inaccuracy appears again on page 450). Later on, Andrews accuse *Belle* of "consistently reinforcing" the discourse of whiteness and minimizing racism (449). Although the author notes that "[t]he film does not entirely ignore the racism that she [Dido] faces" (449), I believe Andrews misses how prevalent racial tension is in *Belle*, namely through the use of different paintings to mirror Dido's position in society[8] and, of course, trough the Zong case. On this same page, a scene from the film is misunderstood: "Elizabeth tells Belle that she is beneath the Lord because of her color, Belle's response is 'it is not me who is beneath him'. Clearly being constructed in this narrative is that Belle's wealth overrides the privileges of her cousin's Whiteness." In this scene Elizabeth is referring to Dido's illegitimacy not her colour (Sagay 81), and the film never conveys the idea that her financial security erases her racial discrimination. Moreover, Andrews apparently does not take into consideration that the film was written and directed by two black women when arguing: "The problem with the narrative, however, is that it is entirely false, a hallucination by the filmmakers caused by the psychosis of Whiteness" (449). The author concludes the essay with "Until the conditions that create Whiteness are destroyed, the

[8] See the chapter "Amma Asante's *Belle*".

psychosis will govern the thoughts and actions of Western society" (451), without suggesting how to proceed. Overall, this essay is informative, and undertakes crucial themes, but lacks accuracy, in particular, when discussing *Belle*, and forces upon this film an ideology it does not sustain. And so, at times, the author seems to draw conclusions based on debatable preconceived ideas, thus misinterpreting the work under analysis.

"'Negro Girl (meager)': Black Women's In/Visibility in Contemporary Films About Slavery" was written by Lisa Botshon and Melinda Plastas and published as part of the book *Women Activists and Civil Rights Leaders in Auto/Biographical Literature and Films* (2018). In sixteen pages this essay contrasts with the previous one in its commentary of *Belle*. The authors compare the figure of the black woman in *12 Years a Slave* (2013, McQueen) and *Belle*, while considering the latter "more successful at creating a fresh representation of a black woman character" (178). Botshon and Plastas contend that the intentions of the filmmakers are feminist and note the singularity of the film: "this film takes risks by utilizing a genre in which black women are almost never cast as the protagonist – the period costume drama." (178). This essay discusses more thoroughly the film and the character of Dido than the others articles alluded to before. *Belle*'s nuanced approach to violence is noted as well as the film's commentary on the white gaze, by mentioning the different art works used in the film:[9]

> Along her way Dido stops and studies a painting that depicts as happy and carefree a very young enslaved boy, similar in age to her, who is accompanying his master. Here Dido confronts the dialectics of human value and art and the dire consequences of the white imagination for black existence; in this moment she realizes that the painting

[9] The painting referenced in this quote is *Charles Stanhope, third Earl of Harrington, and a Servant*. (1782) by Sir Joshua Reynolds, not identfied by the authors Botshon and Plastas.

reassures whites of the benevolence of slavery and the acquiescence of the enslaved. (181)

The authors also recognize the subversive message in *Belle* regarding beauty: "The film breaks with the historical costume genre, one in which black women have never appeared except as servants and slaves, by portraying Dido as beautiful, desirable, and in charge of her own life" (182). Furthermore, Botshon and Plastas relate the narrative of the film with postcolonial theory (183), and underline the agency the film gives Dido as a black woman, something questioned by Andrews. Another difference between this and the previous article is how aware Botshon and Plastas are that *Belle* was never meant to be another *12 Years a Slave*, a film marked by violence against a secondary female character (Andrews 448, Botshon and Plastas 187). This essay is the first and only to point out *Belle*'s filmmaking techniques used to communicate the character's feelings and the cultural spirit of Georgian England.

Also in 2018, James Ward published the book *Memory and Enlightenment*, containing a chapter "Memory and Atrocity: Representing the *Zong*" which discusses the Zong. More specifically, Ward relates the history of the representation of the Zong ship massacre, exploring, for instance, *Mr. Turner* (Mike Leigh, 2014), the novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), the poem *Zong!* (2008) and *Belle* (2014). The author devotes four pages to Amma Asante's film which according to him "aims to reframe and transform the memory of the Zong" (212). Ward notes the similarities *Belle* has with Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), something I develop in the chapter "The Genres of Heritage". Moreover, Ward highlights *Belle*'s approach to slavery and representation noting that the film:

> Takes aim at the 'whitewashed and upper-class presumptions of the mainstream heritage drama' by presenting a black lead actor in a fact-based historical role which did not depend on the depiction of suffering and victimhood. Instead, and as its name intimates, *Belle* revels in the presentation of beauty. Opening shots linger over the sumptuously restored Kenwood house, while the closing frames dwell on the eighteenth-century double portrait of Dido and her cousin Elizabeth. This image displaces Turner's *Slave Ship*[10] as a memorable icon of events depicted in the film. *Belle* therefore represents a significant departure from the modes of horror, mourning, and irresolution which have to date dominated the representation of the Zong in cultural memory. (213)

Ward then details the real cases and speeches of Mansfield which inspired the film, while noting a discrepancy between alleged historical accounts of the Lord Chief Justice and his more empathetic depiction in *Belle*. The author concludes that "*Belle* is thus part of a recent reappraisal which nudges Lord Mansfield towards the kind of thoughtfulness and emotional literacy typified more readily and traditionally by Austen's writings" (216). Overall, Ward is mainly concerned with the way in which the Zong massacre is remembered and depicted, therefore this is the lens through which he analyses *Belle*. Criticism of some historical inaccuracy in the film is present in the essays by Ward, Andrews, and Smith and Hatters Friedman. Although this criticism is valid, Asante notes that the aim of *Belle* was not to recreate history exactly as it was, as she pointed out in an email exchange:[11]

[10] Ward here references the painting *The Slave Ship* by J. M. W. Turner which was inspired by the case of the Zong ship, although the work dates from 1840, fifty-nine years after the said massacre had taken place.
[11] See Appendix.

> A dramatic movie for cinema, as you will know, is a different animal to a documentary film, (which BELLE is not), and also to factual books, alike, and must use elements of fiction to piece together the facts and history that the story is based on, usually in a closed window of two hours or less of screen time.

In sum, the literature on *Belle* is scarce and often does not dissect the film thoroughly or do it justice. Botshon and Plastas are the only authors which begin to describe the film's point of view, filmmaking perspective, and use a combined postcolonial and cultural studies approach to explain its reach and importance. The other essays either focus on the legal side of the narrative or use the film to illustrate a previously established thesis. "'Negro Girl (meager)': Black Women's In/Visibility in Contemporary Films About Slavery" is clearly the text which is closest to this dissertation's approach. Still, I will build on some remarks made in the 2018 essay and add new information to the literature regarding *Belle*. For instance, Botshon and Plastas note the use of "sculptures and paintings" (181). I was able to identify the two main paintings used in the film to mirror Dido's social position, and I also recognise the use of Wedgwood's abolitionist emblem in another visual reference in the film. Moreover, I also identified the title of the book the character of Dido reads as *The Dying Negro: A Poetical Epistle*, published in 1773 by John Bicknell and Thomas Day. The description of these real historical objects in the film, besides the portrait of Dido and Elizabeth, is unprecedented in the literature. These references give weight and depth to the film, since the filmmakers scattered real texts throughout their own text, creating a connection with the period of the story and showing the research put into the world-building of the narrative.

Accordingly, this dissertation aims to fill the gaps in the scientific literature about *Belle*, as described above. Namely the lack of focus on the film's narrative, initially broached by Boshton and Plastas, and the analysis of *Belle* in relation to film theory and

film history, a topic I discuss in "The Genres of Heritage". Moreover, I undertake an approach which focuses on the film through issues of identity, whereby I make use of intersectionality and a conjunctural view to understand *Belle*, because the director of the film notes this as a crucial element of the film: "The idea is that the Zong [the slave ship on which a massacre took place, the legal case around which forms the backdrop to "Belle"], and the painting were used as tools to explore Belle's political awakening, and her identity, all at the same time".[12] Furthermore, I wish to discuss the relevance of *Belle* as a heritage film which breaks new ground and in some ways criticizes its own genre. I also relate this aspect to the current cultural state of affairs in which the film is made, namely the conjuncture of British society. In order to achieve these goals, I followed a methodology consisting of a literary review regarding *Belle*, the results of this review included above. One important work written about the film is Paula Byrne's companion book to *Belle* (2014), which I quote and reference throughout the dissertation. This book details the events and personalities depicted in the film, in an attempt to give context, as explained by Asante in an email exchange: [13]

> This book was published at the same time as the movie theatre release of Belle, 6 years ago. This partner book obviously did not exist before I made the film, but harnesses much of the same research that I also pieced together when researching Dido, in order to write and direct the film. In addition, it contains the actual factual account of Dido Belle's life and is there to fulfil those factual elements of her life in as much detail as possible, for any audience member, who was moved to find out more about her and dig into the history that the film is based on, after being introduced to Dido Belle by the film.

[12] From *IndieWire* interview.
[13] See Appendix.

In spite of the importance of Byrne's book, I do not consider it within my literary review since it exists as a research summary of what influenced the filmmakers and is attached to the release of the film. Moreover, the book does not have a particular theoretical perspective or approach, unlike the essays considered as state of the art.

The essays written about *Belle* and Byrne's book contain much important information and opinions regarding the film. However, many questions were left unanswered by them, and these questions inspired the present dissertation. Firstly, I wondered about the place and importance of *Belle* within British cinema, specifically the heritage genre, and also within the context of English language cinema. From this curiosity were born the chapters "The Genres of Heritage" and "Black Women in Film", where I tackle the identity of *Belle* as a film while exploring its importance in terms of representation. While conducting my research I felt the need to find a concept which encompassed the central struggle of *Belle*, something which connected the narrative stages of the film and the intersection of race, class and gender, the elements which create the sense of displacement Dido experiences. Bakhtin's notion of threshold seemed to fit my needs perfectly, as I demonstrate in "Visual Storytelling". As such I made the threshold identity the thread which connects the different chapters of this dissertation, because whether I am discussing film genre, representation, culture or painting, the idea of an identity in distress is always present. This brings me to another important component of this work, visual representation. Visual art or painting is discussed in depth in "Race and Representation", in order to study the omnipresence of portraits and visual figures in *Belle*. As a film which revolves around the painting of the cousins Dido and Elizabeth,

Belle makes use of images to tell its story and highlight the consequence of the portrait which inspired the film itself. Asante elaborates on this in an email exchange: [14]

> The paintings are examples of artwork of the time, positioning people of colour – Black people – as they were painted in comparison to white people at the time. They are used to present to an audience evidence of why the historic painting of Dido Belle with her cousin Elizabeth was ground-breaking in its time […]

Apart from the central questions of the film, genre, representation, cultural significance, in the chapter "*Belle*: The Film" I also undertake an analysis of this visual text, by using more of Bakhtin's concepts and relating them to three mirror scenes I call "The Mirror Trilogy" and three critical scenes I call "The Crisis Trilogy". In these sections I aim to analyse and showcase the richness of techniques used to construct *Belle*'s narrative. Finally, in "Film as Portrait" I discuss how the notion of portrait is crucial in *Belle*, and in "Wardrobe, Colour and Sound" I make a more technical analysis of the film, while showcasing how filmmaking techniques serve the purpose of the narrative and theme of the film.

[14] See Appendix.

2. The Threshold Identity and Intersectionality

> Belonging is a foundational human need. For most people, throughout most of history, it was inherited from family, shaped by society, and contained within language, customs, religion, and nation-hood, in an unconscious process of social conditioning. That's not to say these identities aren't frequently disrupted, dispersed, updated – that's as much a part of the human condition as the need to belong. (Afua Hirsch)

The crux of my analysis is the idea that even though identity is based on a sense of coherent belonging, as argued in the quotation above, in cases such as that of the protagonist of the film under scrutiny, the idea of a threshold identity is more apt. Therefore, it is necessary to look back at the origin and legacy of this concept. We can trace the concept of identity in crisis and dual belonging back to the late nineteenth century, in the theory of double consciousness originated by Du Bois in his essay "Strivings of the Negro People" (1897). This concept refers to the contradictory duality of being African-American, American as in white, and African as in black,[15] since the two notions were, according to Du Bois, understood as mutually exclusive. Paul Gilroy devotes chapter four of *The Black Atlantic* (1993) to this concept. But before Gilroy, Du Bois had an immense influence on another author, who is in part responsible for the birth of postcolonial thinking: Frantz Fanon. In the late nineteenth century, the idea of double consciousness was in fact employed in instances of split identity (Bruce 300), something Du Bois, who worked within the domain of psychology, would have been aware of.

[15] See Bruce for a more in-depth explanation of Du Bois' concept.

Similarly, Fanon born in Martinique, a French colony,[16] was himself a psychiatrist. He writes in the Introduction of his book *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (1952):

> L'analyse que nous entreprenons est psychologique. Il demeure toutefois évident que pour nous la véritable désaliénation du Noir implique une prise de conscience abrupte des réalités économiques et sociales. S'il y a complexe d'infériorité, c'est à la suite d'un double processus :
>
> - économique d'abord ;
> - par intériorisation ou, mieux, épidermisation de cette infériorité, ensuite.
>
> […] On verra que l'aliénation du Noir n'est pas une question individuelle. A côté de la phylogénie et de l'ontogénie, il y a la sociogénie. (10-11)

Fanon aims to conduct a psychological analysis of the effects of colonialism, racism and white supremacy on individuals. Yet he recognizes that one's mental life is impacted by one's surroundings, as such Fanon places economic and social realities as the inducers of an inferiority complex in black people. The understanding that a social conjuncture is the source of suffering is instrumental, and from this point Fanon goes on to explore how this takes place. One of the main points made by the author, which parallels Du Bois', is the central notion that black is not white, and white is not black, for the two races are seen as fundamentally antagonistic. Fanon describes the paradox of being black and intellectual : "Le nègre c'est le sauvage, tandis que l'étudiant est un évolué" (*Peau Noire* 67). However, he negates the possibility of changing himself to fit these standards "Pourtant je refuse cette amputation" (*Peau Noire* 137). This fracturing opposition is essential to the foundation of slavery and consequently of racism, the effects of which are elaborated in this dissertation, as it relates to the threshold identity. Nonetheless, I am analysing a

[16] Today, Martinique is considered an insular region of France, being part of the European Union.

narrative about a black mixed-race woman, therefore the place of the woman, the *black* woman, is fundamental.

To support my view point, I mention other black women and black female figures, beyond Dido Belle, when pertinent for the subject. For example, Mary Prince, the first woman to publish a slave narrative, is one of them. Born in 1788, Prince's date and place of death are unknown, although it is believed she spent the later part of her life in England. Nearly no information is known of Prince after the publication of *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* (1831). The same cannot be said of other authors of slave narratives, all men, who became public figures. Dido was presumably born on English soil and she was undoubtedly raised in England. Mary Prince was born in Bermuda, spent most of her life, as far as we know, in the West Indies and later her narrative was published in London, where she may have spent the rest of her days.

Throughout the dissertation, African-American women's work or their visual images are present, and this can create a problem of possible homogenization of the experiences of black women from different cultures. However, the aim of this work is not to do so, but to recognize the diversity and heterogeneous nature of people who are treated as other, while identifying common traits and issues they face, since slavery, racism and imperialism have affected an enormous amount of individuals and their descendants until today.[17] For this purpose, the notion of Black Atlantic by Paul Gilroy is pertinent. In explaining what he means by Black Atlantic, Gilroy begins by noting that:

> […] the reflexive cultures and consciousness of the European settlers and those of the Africans they enslaved, the "Indians" they slaughtered, and the Asians they

[17] Importantly, colonialism and racism are not only an issue that affects people of sub-Saharan African origin, since the British empire, and other empires, extended themselves to Asia, South-America, Oceania and Polynesia. Therefore, different racial and ethnic dynamics of power were created with different native or local populations.

> indentured were not, even in situations of the most extreme brutality, sealed off hermetically from each other […] (*The Black Atlantic* 2)

Gilroy is consequently reminding the reader that colonialism was far-reaching in more ways than one, because the coloniser links their nation to subordinate colonies and slave selling ports through trade, wherefore all the peoples affected and victimized by this colonialist violence are connected. There is an inevitable mixing, by kidnapping and brutalizing people from different areas, tied by the flowing ocean. This is the image chosen by Gilroy to encompass the richly diverse commonality of the diaspora.

> This book addresses one small area in the grand consequence of this historical conjunction – the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering that I have heuristically called the black Atlantic world. (*The Black Atlantic* 3)

Here we find the notion of conjuncture, a network of origins which form the Black Atlantic, the passage(s) connecting black people across the seas. In the above quote, double consciousness is also addressed, meaning the internal conflict of a dual belonging to more than one culture or rather the simultaneous belonging to two places or identities. Accordingly, double consciousness is one of the main ideas present in Gilroy's work (*The Black Atlantic* 10).

To address the subject of duality and complex identity, I would like to reference another name, Amin Maalouf. The Lebanese-French author published *Les Identités Meurtrières* (1998), an essay in which he questions and discusses ideas about identity and the conflicts that arise because of identity. Maalouf is mainly a novelist, however this work of his seems appropriate for this analysis. The personal life of the author naturally

informs a lot of his arguments, as was the case of the writers above mentioned. As someone who makes his living writing in a second language, not his mother tongue, as an Arab in France, Maalouf provides rich interpretations of our societies, and how identity works and is used by us. He expresses an analogous view to Fanon on contradictory identity, using the image of amputation:

> Ce qui fait que je suis moi-même et pas un autre, c'est que je suis ainsi à la lisière de deux pays, de deux ou trois langues, de plusieurs traditions culturelles. C'est précisément cela qui définit mon identité. Serais-je plus authentique si je m'amputais d'une partie de moi-même ? (*Les Identités* 9)

Once again, we find the denial of a loss or exclusion of a part of oneself for the sake of labels or norms one does not subscribe to. Maalouf reiterates the idea that identity cannot be sectioned, it is rather a unique mixture of ingredients that cannot be singled out individually, one's identity is being many things at once:

> L'identité ne se compartimente pas, elle ne se répartit ni par moitiés, ni par tiers, ni par plages cloisonnées. Je n'ai pas plusieurs identités, j'en ai une seule, faite de tous les éléments qui l'ont façonnée, selon un "dosage" particulier qui n'est jamais le même d'une personne à l'autre. (*Les Identités* 10)

This dilemma is what tortures Dido through a large part of *Belle*, until she begins to understand that the duality of who she is is not the problem, rather it is the English *perspective* on the duality which is problematic.

Considering the centenary legacy of writing about identity in conflict, we come to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the threshold chronotope from *The Dialogic Imagination*

(1975). This theoretical concept is employed originally in the study of literature,[18] and I transpose it to a filmic narrative. This very approach can be found in Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener's *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (2015), in which Bakhtin's chronotope of threshold aids the study of "Cinema as Door". Elsaesser and Hagener connect the notion of time and space with the chronotope, thus creating a barrier like a door, or a threshold. While the image of the door is often used in film, the authors simultaneously consider the cinema screen itself as a door, a threshold the audience crosses into a new world, writing: "A threshold always has two sides, as it simultaneously connects and separates – a border can be crossed precisely because a division always implies spatial proximity" (41). In the chapter "Visual Storytelling" I expand on Bakhtin's concept and its link with notions from film theorist Syd Field. The threshold is an image which helps the analysis of any film, but *Belle* lends itself more than most narratives to this idea because the whole journey of Dido, the main character, is a threshold journey. As a woman stranded between spaces and names, she embodies a double consciousness. Dido is aware of how others see her, as she finds herself in other black painted figures and thus sees herself as strange, even vile. Moreover, I undertake a thorough deconstruction of a trilogy of mirror scenes in *Belle*, which represent Dido's crossing into self-acceptance and recognition of her whole self. Therefore, the image of the mirror is of significance. It can be a threshold itself, a link to our own psyche but also a door into a different dimension, like in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871). Elsaesser and Hagener state:

[18] See Bakhtin (3)

> Yet this look at oneself in the mirror is also a look from outside, a look that no longer belongs to me, that judges or forgives me, criticises or flatters me, but at any rate has become the look of another, or 'the Other'. (65)

This is a reminder of the problems raised by double consciousness, the mirror represents the cognizance of how others see us, as if we could look at ourselves from the outside, whilst being aware of ourselves. This is precisely what Du Bois, Fanon, Gilroy and Maalouf explore. It is from these literary and cultural references that I establish the notion of threshold identity.

In order to contextualize this threshold identity in *Belle*, we must acknowledge the intersectionality of the object. The film is vocal about the conjunction of class, race and gender in its narrative. The character of Dido, most of all, materializes this intersection, the origin of her internal conflict. Thus, I choose the approach of intersectionality to combat conflict in identity. Originated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality, since the late 1980s, has become widely known and used across disciplines. For the purposes of this dissertation, I reference the author's original propositions, in the 1989 essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" where Crenshaw lays out the basic concept of intersectionality and why it matters as an alternative perspective regarding discrimination. Crenshaw uses the image of a traffic intersection to explain this idea:

> The point is that Black women can experience discrimination in any number of ways and that the contradiction arises from our assumptions that their claims of exclusion must be unidirectional. Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an

> intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (149)

The theory of intersectionality aims to reconsider the definition of discrimination, focusing on how Black women are excluded from the label of woman, which signifies "white woman", whilst they are excluded from the so-called standard race oppression because they are not black men. The supposition behind this is that when we think of women, we think of white women, and when we think of black, we think of men. Thus, Crenshaw declares that in a black woman's life, discrimination can come from all these different avenues that may intersect with each other. This concept is vastly important since it can be applied to many other marginalized groups who also suffer from not belonging to "standardized" labels of identity. And even regarding people who may seemingly fit into such categories, intersectionality underlines the significance of the complex conjuncture each individual inhabits because of their class, gender, sexual orientation, race, beliefs or origin. In *Ain't I a Woman* (1990) bell hooks[19] put it simply: "As far back as slavery, white people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked white men first, white women second though sometimes equal to black men, who are ranked third, and black women last" (52- 53). Notwithstanding, drawing on Stuart Hall (1932-2014), categories like gender and race are reductive, in the sense they are socially constructed ("The Spectacle" 243-244), and are ultimately labels people have used to categorize each other, often within the process of oppression. It is widely agreed

[19] The author choses to not capitalize the firsts letters in her name.

that the idea of race is not scientifically valid or true, as there is one human race ("The Spectacle" 211). However, the cultural concept of race still remains in use.

Further, I turn to the idea of conjuncture or conjunctural analysis, which precedes intersectionality. The notion of conjuncture by Hall is founded on his innovative analysis of Antonio Gramsci's ideas, as presented in the essay "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity" (1986). In his writings, Gramsci (1891-1937) was mostly preoccupied with the Italian context he knew, that of Mussolini's fascism. The Italian author wrote from the perspective of his own historical period, as a left-wing journalist who was censured by the fascist regime. However, as Hall explains, the marks of his time are not a hinderance to his theoretical ideas:

> Gramsci's work often appears almost too concrete: too historically specific, too delimited in its references, too "descriptively" analytic, too time and context-bound. His most illuminating ideas and formulations are typically of this conjunctural kind. ("Gramsci's Relevance" 6)

Gramsci practiced an open Marxism,[20] as Hall notes that as "Gramsci moves from the general terrain of Marx's mature concepts (as outlined, for example, in *Capital*) to specific historical conjunctures, he can still continue to work within their field of reference." ("Gramsci's Relevance" 7). Thus, Gramsci's ideas focus more on the historical contextual conjuncture of his time, in a way that was missing from Marxist theory. And this will be what draws Hall to find in his ideas concepts that can be applied to new situations. Indeed, though Gramsci never focused directly on questions of

[20] This means Gramsci was influenced by and based himself on Marxist theory, however he was not restrained by the doctrine. He did not have a fundamentalist approach to Marx's ideas, for he was able to see beyond some of Marxism's shortcomings, which I elaborate more on the following paragraphs.

ethnicity, race or colonialism,[21] "his concepts may still be useful to us in our attempt to think through the adequacy of existing social theory paradigms in these areas" ("Gramsci's Relevance" 8). Regarding the most important theoretical ideas that Hall underlines in Gramsci which are relevant to our discussion, Hall begins by naming the criticism of "economism" of traditional Marxism, where Gramsci puts forth the idea that there are more actors at play beyond economy in a historical conjuncture. Disagreeing with this reductionism he proposes the "social formation", meaning that:

> […] societies are necessarily complexly structured totalities, with different levels of articulation (the economic, the political, the ideological instances) in different combinations; each combination giving rise to a different configuration of social forces and hence to a different type of social development. ("Gramsci's Relevance" 12)

Hall also underlines many times an understanding of power struggles and social relationships as including regional and national facets, whose intersection can have many results. Furthermore, Gramsci introduces the concept that out of this "relation of forces" can come cultural hegemony, which is a process and not a fixed circumstance:

> The modern state exercises moral and educative leadership – it "plans, urges, incites, solicits, punishes". It is where the bloc of social forces which dominates over it not only justifies and maintains its domination but wins by leadership and authority the active consent of those over whom it rules. Thus, it plays a pivotal role in the construction of hegemony. In this reading, it becomes, not a *thing* to be seized, overthrown or "smashed" with a single blow, but a complex *formation* in

[21] Gramsci did write about race in letters to his sister-in-law Tatiana in 1931 (Gramsci 27,28). In them, he criticises the Klu Klux Klan, and the idea of race. In fact, Gramsci was sensitive to this issue, his wife Julia was of Jewish origin.

> modern societies which must become the focus of a number of different strategies and struggles because it is an arena of different social contestations. ("Gramsci's Relevance" 19)

This definition of hegemony is an insidious one, for hegemonic control is not a linear happening, it is an intricate agreement between ruler and subject which slowly gains ground, and furthermore, it is not achieved through forceful authority. According to Gramsci, the primary tool in constructing hegemony seems to be ideology, divided in "two floors" as Hall puts it. The first is philosophy; but philosophical notions per se have no influence, they need to reach "popular thought" to eventually become common sense. Consequently, this is not a simple process, as expressed by Hall: "In recognizing that questions of ideology are always collective and social, not individual, Gramsci explicitly acknowledges the necessary complexity and interdiscursive character of the ideological field" ("Gramsci's Relevance" 22). To Gramsci, hegemony is mainly cultural because it is based on ideology. This ideology is achieved by transforming a philosophy into common sense for a whole population, in a way that it pervades and inhabits minds and opinions, although not in a homogeneous manner.[22] This is the major concept to be understood, that all phenomena – hegemony and ideology – do not occur in a simple way but rather through a conjuncture of aspects and in different sectors of society. Thus, according to Gramsci, as analysed and emphasized by Hall, a process of hegemony takes place through different institutions which interact to send a message. Hence, the complexity attributed to social formations, which depends not only on economy or class, is transposed to race and gender, for example. These categories also play a role and are used in conjunctures of power and, moreover, change depending on context, although

[22] Hall also writes about this concept of ideology in his essay "The Problem of Ideology – Marxism Without Guarantees" (29).

they are always present. In the English context, class has typically played a main role in the social hierarchy, as we see in *Belle* that finding an equal or superior match for marriage is paramount because one must always seek a higher social status and income. This is why, in the film, the Mansfields think it better that Dido does not come out into society, since they initially doubt she will ever find a husband that would not lower her position.

In conclusion, if the notion of conjuncture can be applied to national and regional issues, so can it be applied to issues of race and ethnicity. Accordingly, Hall summarizes: "what needs to be noticed is the persistent way in which these specific, differentiated forms of incorporation have consistently been associated with the appearance of racist, ethnically segmentary and other similar social features" ("Gramsci's Relevance" 25). Accordingly, Hall sees Gramsci's theories applied to the context he cares about, a social formation where race is part of the complex structure of power:

> Schooling, cultural organizations, family and sexual life, the patterns and modes of civil association, churches and religions, communal or organizational forms, ethnically specific institutions, and many other such sites play an absolutely vital role in giving, sustaining and reproducing different societies in a racially structured form. ("Gramsci's Relevance" 26)

This analysis is an interestingly intersectional perspective of a hegemonic apparatus which functions by sending messages through its various institutions in order to first assemble and then cultivate the status quo. This pertains to the context of this dissertation as we are precisely dealing with a historical conjuncture which must be deconstructed in order to understand the representation of black women. One of the institutions through which hegemony can be cultivated is the production of visual art. As I focus on paintings

from the Georgian era, later adapted or reused in other artistic mediums, I underline how much more powerful these objects were then. Before the advent of photography, cinema, television, and the internet, three-hundred years ago the main form of visual representation was painting. Dido's true identity is only known to us because someone painted her. Her story encompasses an intersection of race, gender and class, a life immortalized on canvas (see fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Martin, David. *Portrait of Dido Belle and Elizabeth Murray*. Circa 1775-85, Scone Palace, Scotland.

David Martin's striking painting *Portrait of Dido Belle and Elizabeth Murray*. (c. 1775-85) is a rarity in the universe of European art,[23] because a black woman is placed not beneath, not expressively inferior to a white figure, but even slightly superior, as Dido's head wrapped in a fine turban is a little above her cousin's. The intricacies of this painting and why it is so interesting for the purposes of this dissertation are explored in the chapter "Race and Representation". For now, of note is the intersection of race, class and gender in a single image. Close to two-hundred-and-thirty years after its completion, a film named *Belle* would be released, portraying the life of the two cousins immortalised on canvas. Not unlike in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the painting and the portrait were major cultural mediums, in the twenty-first century, where media like cinema and television are supreme, there continues to be a problematic representation of so-called minorities, as is the case of people of colour. We may come to understand this situation as a result of the white patriarchal hegemony, in which a black woman, not unlike Dido, is according to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak particularly suppressed: "Clearly, if you are poor, black and female you get it in three ways" ("The Subaltern" 90). The element of intersectionality in Spivak's writing is useful to the question of representation we aim to discuss.

In the highly influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985) Spivak introduces her idea of subaltern, which is influenced by Gramsci, as acknowledged by the author ("The Subaltern" 78). [24] Before delving into the analysis of the question posed in the title, Spivak begins by solidifying the importance of nuanced identities, what she calls the "heterogeneous other" or subaltern ("The Subaltern" 84). With a focus on women,

[23] For an analysis of Dido Belle's painting see the chapter "The Girl in the Picture" in Byrne's *Belle*.
[24] For a definition and overview of the subaltern see Morton (48). Gramsci originally speaks of the subaltern situation of the people, who have barriers which prevent them from speaking (22, 23). I note the field of Subaltern Studies, emanating also, but not exclusively, from Spivak's work (see Ludden, and McGrail and Pillai).

Spivak invokes epistemic violence as crucial in the oppression of the subaltern, particularly within academic or elite classes, who may seek to address such individuals and their issues. Epistemic violence is considered as a way of marginalizing subaltern and third-world female voices within western discourses.[25] This notion explains how writing and discourse is used to construct the other, in this case also a woman:

> Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence'. It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. ("The Subaltern" 82, 83)

Born in Calcutta before the official dissolution of the British Raj (1858-1947), Spivak is concerned with the colonial and postcolonial hierarchies. In her analysis, she explains how the "females of the urban subproletariat" are at the very bottom, in the lowest position of the social ladder. Moreover, the author underlines there is also an aspect of self-critique and awareness necessary in any academic work regarding misogyny, racism and the fight against epistemic violence ("The Subaltern" 90). In Spivak we find a denouncing of a problem with the construction of the subaltern's consciousness: if academia or the elite write about forgotten voices, in a way, they perpetuate this state of being forgotten. The voices are not truly being empowered, rather they are being made the subject of thought and analysis, which is reminiscent of imperial and colonial practices. As such, we should remember to not homogenize human experience, to not

[25] For more on this subject see Fricker and Medina.

ignore other groups or geographies in a myopic view of the world. Speaking of epistemic violence, the French philosopher Michel Foucault's notions about power, knowledge and discourse seem relevant. According to Sarah Mills in *Michel Foucault* (2003), Foucault (1926-1984) asserts that power and knowledge depend on each other:

> […] knowledge is not dispassionate but rather an integral part of struggles over power, but it also draws attention to the way that, in producing knowledge, one is also making a claim for power. For Foucault, it is more accurate to use his newly formed compound 'power/knowledge' to emphasise the way that these two elements depend on one another. (*Michel Foucault* 69)

In Foucault's concept of power/knowledge we find a symbiosis of the two elements which cannot exist without each other, in such a way that power influences knowledge and vice-versa:

> Thus, where there are imbalances of power relations between groups of people or between institutions/states, there will be a production of knowledge. Because of the institutionalised imbalance in power relations between men and women in western countries, Foucault would argue, information is produced about women; thus we find many books in libraries about women but few about men, and similarly, many about the working classes but few about the middle classes. There are many books about the problems of Black people, but not about Whites. (*Michel Foucault* 69)

This notion can help explain, for instance, the very production of this dissertation. Since there is a shortage of literary production about the film *Belle* and the painting of the two cousins, necessarily, more will be written about this subject. With this in mind, power in Foucault's universe is used to determine what knowledge or fact are, and here we find a

link with Spivak's preoccupations regarding epistemic violence. If "For something to be considered to be a fact, it must be subjected to a thorough process of ratification by those in positions of authority" (Mills 72) then the production of oppression through knowledge is deciphered – knowledge is power.

Towards the end of "Can the Subaltern Speak?", which has now become clear as more of a rhetorical question, Spivak introduces the famous phrase "white men are saving brown women from brown men", regarding the banning by the British of the Hindu practice of sati or widow-burning in British India.[26] Highlighting the complete absence of actual female voices in this decision and debate Spivak writes "what interests me is that the protection of woman (today the 'third-world woman') becomes a signifier for the establishment of a good society which must, at such inaugurative moments, transgress mere legality, or equity of legal policy." (94). Here the protection of women by men is seen as problematic. Because to protect is in reality to wield power over women, otherwise why would women need protection? In this respect, male protection is in fact an important element in the plot of the film *Belle*, as Lord Mansfield is depicted as over-bearing of his Dido, wanting to shield his daughter from the realities of her (black) people and the realities of marriage, therefore ironically, the patriarchal demands of the society he raised her in. Virginia Woolf touches on this in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) when she writes "Anything may happen when womanhood has ceased to be a protected occupation" (48).

Overall, we find an important subtlety in Spivak's view of the subaltern: even if I speak but I am not part of the dominant group my words will never be considered as equal to those of an individual belonging to that sector of society. This is a critical conclusion

[26] For a discussion on how sati became an issue of culture, in opposition to one of religion, see *The Claims of Culture* (2002) by Seyla Benhabib (5-6).

for the understanding of the social inner workings which affect all of us. For instance, in *Belle*, the black heroine may be a key figure in the plot, yet in the real history behind the film and in the actual's films account of legal proceedings around the slave trade, the influence of her voice is unproven. The character Dido may be a symbol for all the black people who had considerably less public attention and praise within the abolition struggle in England. William Wilberforce (1759-1833) is perhaps the most famous figure in the abolition movement, whereas people like Mary Prince, who published their slave narratives, have comparatively lower profiles. As such, it seems that a white man is necessary to lead social change for marginalized groups.[27] Women spoke, women have been speaking. However, their voice alone is not enough, and it continues to be questioned: the subaltern still cannot speak. We can, however, begin to see positive change, for instance in the fact that *Belle* was written and directed by two black women, while many other women worked behind the scenes of the film. Notably, yet, this project did not achieve a particularly wide academic recognition, a fact proven by the scarce research about it.

In conclusion, I aim to explore the social and cultural contexts of Dido Belle's portrait and filmic representation. In order to do this, I study the hegemonic dynamics which generate the representation of women of African descent in British and European culture within those contexts. What is more, I approach the main subject of this dissertation, the film *Belle*, and its surrounding elements through the notion of threshold identity. The two main ideas which bind all the theories mentioned above are the notions of conjuncture and intersectionality. The former meaning "a combination of events", and the latter

[27] I mention the #MeToo movement in Hollywood, where several women accused producer mogul Harvey Weinstein, among other male celebrities, of sexual harassment and rape, as an example. Even though the movement was founded by Tarana Burke, an African-American woman, in 2006, it was the journalistic reports of Ronan Farrow, a white man, who seemingly gave weight to the claims. Farrow went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for his important work. The problem one can find in the events described is how the voices of women, especially women of colour continue to be ignored or silenced.

meaning "The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage".[28] Thus, it is through an association of institutions, systems and social categories that we will deconstruct the events, ideas and products that make *Belle* an intriguing case study for how western society views identity.

[28] According to the Oxford English Dictionary online.

3. The Genres of Heritage

Genre is probably the first trait we use to describe a film. With one or few words, such as action, drama, romantic comedy, we immediately begin to imagine and construct an idea, as we apply all the conventions of the said genre to that film. Nowadays, on any streaming platform, films are organized by genre, in order to help us browse and find what we want to watch, as we assume we will find a certain type of product under each label. Indeed, labelling a film, a work of art, with one or two words can be quite helpful yet reductive. Accordingly, we must keep in mind that a genre encompasses a vast and complex category of films, which, although similar in their main elements, can differ greatly from one another.

If one were to place *Belle* in a genre, it would most likely be that of the heritage film. In *English Heritage, English Cinema* (2008), Andrew Higson attempts to, firstly, question heritage cinema as a genre, and secondly, establish what heritage can be. Importantly, the author remarks this genre label is a fabrication or construction, and he presents some of its staple attributes, such as "a strong British element" and "the commodification of the past" (11). Higson concludes that:

> There is no point in defining a term like heritage cinema too tightly – no point, for instance, in saying that the heritage film never deals with the great events of national history (that would exclude a film like *Elizabeth*), or that all heritage films are literary adaptations (*Chariots of Fire* (1981) is a good example). (13)

As such, *Belle* can fit in a category like heritage, especially if we look at this genre without too many restrictions. *Belle* is not a literary adaptation and it deals with events of British

history, like the slave trade. Higson elucidates how often heritage films are "character studies or dissections of specific milieux, and do not therefore feel the need to push the narrative relentlessly forward" (38). For instance, in *A Room with a View* (1985), he describes how "the camera seems more concerned to play over the paintings on the wall, Lucy's dress, and the particular quality of light in the room" (38). This pictorialist style of cinematography is a crucial element of *Belle*, to the point that the following description could have been written about the 2014 film:

> Many of the films include set-piece celebratory events, lavish dinner-parties or balls, for instance, which provide plenty of opportunities for filling the frame with splendid costumes and hair-dos, tableware and food. Equally frequently, conversations take place against a backdrop of picturesque semi-rural southern English scenery, or the frontage of some magnificent castle, stately home, or quaint cottage, the types ancient architectural and landscape properties conserved by the National Trust and English Heritage. (40)

Visually, *Belle* presents many of these characteristics, the impressive outdoors scenes filled with green and flowers, the intricate set and costume design, all point in the direction of heritage cinema, or a form of it. This was, no doubt, intentional, as the director Amma Asante has explained in interviews that she wanted to make an "*Austenesque*" film.[29] In *Name Dropping: A No-Nonsense Guide to the Use of Names in Everyday Language* (2006) by Philip Gooden, *Austenesque* is explained as such:

> It is hard to sum up Jane Austen or *Austenesque* in a handful of adjectives. She has her own flavour, easy to recognize, hard to analyse. Novels like *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) or *Emma* (1816) combine a Cinderella-style fairy-tale, in which

[29] See the interview of Amma Asante at Talks at Google, starting at 9 minutes and 31 seconds.

> the neglected or apparently undeserving heroine finally achieves happiness, with some of the most hard-headed social observation ever committed to paper. For all her awareness of human weakness and stupidity, and of social pressures, Jane Austen still produces happy endings. Depending on the angle from which she's regarded, she is an arch-romantic or an arch-realist. *Austenesque* is not found very often, perhaps because the word is slightly cumbersome. (6)

This explanation is more concerned with the literary sense of the word. However, in literature or film, the essence of Austen's style remains similar, especially since all her finished works have been adapted into film or television. Therefore, Austen's style lives on very much through adaptations. From this definition we gather that an *Austenesque* story typically has a seemingly neglected heroine, a happy ending and a trait of either romance or realism, or a mix of both. The above description is helpful, yet more elements can be considered in defining the term. Although our Austen heroine is black (she has natural curly hair, and stands out from the all-white cast),[30] Jane Austen's so-called essence of style is still present. Even though Dido is undervalued or even scorned, she does get her happy ending and, importantly, the film mixes romance with realism, in its depiction of society and relationships. When we look at the use of the word *Austenesque* in academic texts, we find that some authors, such as Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka (128) and Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun (5-11), use it in order to characterize something that is Austen-like, something that bears what is considered typical or reminiscent of Jane Austen's universe.[31]

[30] With the exception of Mabel, the servant of the Mansfields, however, she is a secondary character, and not present in the publicized images of the film.
[31] Borowska-Szerszun uses the word as such: "truly Austenesque attention to social custom and proper manners" (5), "Austenesque domestic realism" (11).

Moreover, the story of *Belle* also bears the typical Austen "love triangle",[32] since Dido has two love interests, John Davinier, Dido's real-life husband, and Oliver Ashford, a fictionalized fiancé. I here label this a "love triangle" basing myself on the work of Jane Austen, as her heroine typically has two romantic interests.[33] *Pride and Prejudice* is particularly intriguing in this case, since the couple created by Austen has many parallels with Dido and John. In the early stages of their acquaintance, Dido and John seem to dislike each other, Dido sees a lack of manners and perhaps refinement in the clergyman's son, and John sees arrogance and even ignorance, in this compelling lady. There is mainly a class prejudice between the two, and possibly a gender bias from John, who assumes Dido to be childish in intellect. In the case of *Belle*, the gender roles are reversed in comparison with *Pride and Prejudice*, since the woman is superior in rank to the man. Therefore, Dido has an aristocratic pride that translates into haughtiness, and John has pride in his intellect, because he has no class status to support him. John and Dido may share a likeness with Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, for these judgments of character are the fruit of misunderstanding and prejudice (Coelho 65, 75).[34]

What is more, the characters come to realize, as they discover each other, that they have much in common. Although they probably find the other physically attractive, John and Dido do not truly come to love and admire one another solely on this ground. What brings them together is their shared ideology. Dido is captivated by John's moral values,

[32] In *Jane Austen on Screen* (2003) on page 88 we find a reference to "two love triangles" in the 1999 film adaptation of *Mansfield Park*. Moreover, one can find multiple online posts like "How to Write a Love Triangle Like Jane Austen" (Hillerich) or "Emma: an Awesome Adaptation Featuring a Love Triangle" (Shaw). As such, the love triangle seems to be an important element of Jane Austen fictionalized universe.

[33] In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Marianne Dashwood had the romantic interests of John Willoughby and Colonel Brandon, in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Elizabeth Bennet was paired with Fitzwilliam Darcy and George Wickham, in *Mansfield Park* (1814), Fanny Price had Edmund Bertram and Henry Crawford.

[34] See Coelho (65-75) for an explanation of the misjudgements in *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), regarding Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy.

idealism and selfless nature. He leaves Mansfield's tutelage because he respects Dido's right to information and cannot agree with a censorship of her intellect. Dido shows herself to be curious and bright, perhaps something he did not expect from a lady, which may explain his initial disdain. Moreover, Dido is highly defiant of authority when she steals her father's documents to help John's investigation of the Zong case. As she becomes engaged in the fight for justice, John's infatuation and admiration for her only increase. An intimacy is found in their sense of social exclusion, and importantly, John expresses his attraction to Dido in an honest and respectable manner. From him, we never see exotification or objectification. He is the only character, besides John Lindsay, who considers Dido's maternal side worthy and never shameful (Sagay 70). The fact that John Davinier does not adhere to and, in fact, vehemently opposes racist beliefs is the great factor that differentiates him from the Ashfords, which is ultimately the deal breaker for Dido's engagement to Oliver. Similarly, George Wickham is Lizzie Bennet's initial suitor, but he is eventually discovered as a flawed and twisted person, much like James and Oliver Ashford.

Another Jane Austen narrative we find referenced in *Belle*, is *Mansfield Park*, as Paula Byrne extensively unpacks the links between the two stories. It is known that Edward Austen, Jane's brother, was a friend of Elizabeth Murray's husband's family, the Finch-Hattons (Byrne 243). Because of this, in 1805 Jane Austen visited Elizabeth at Eastwell Park, where she lived with her husband. Due to this connection, Byrne ponders if Austen's relationship with the family could have influenced her work. *Mansfield Park* is Austen's only novel which features the slave trade as part of the narrative.[35] Furthermore, we can wonder if Fanny Price could be some sort of reincarnation of Dido Belle, a young girl "who rises from being the most lowly member of the household to the

[35] For an analysis of *Mansfield Park* in terms of slavery and empire see Fowler.

best-loved" (Byrne 244). Moreover, there is obviously the name Mansfield, found in the novel's title and William Murray's title. *Mansfield Park* has been adapted into many mediums: film, television, theatre and opera. In the 1999 film adaptation, starring Frances O'Connor as Fanny Price and Jonny Lee Miller as Edmund Bertram, the scene where Fanny Price arrives at Mansfield Park in a carriage is recreated when Dido arrives at Kenwood House.

Fig. 2. (00:03:12)[36] Fanny Price saying goodbye to her mother from the carriage that will take her to Mansfield Park. She leaves her family in a shabby seashore house.

[36] When a shot is taken form a scene in a film the time stamp is always referenced as such (hours:mintues:seconds).

Fig. 3. (00:05:21) The carriage, where Fanny Price travels, arrives at Mansfield Park

Fig. 4. (00:00:53) The port town where John Lindsay fetches his natural daughter Dido, in order to take her to Kenwood.

Fig. 5. (00:03:37) Dido arrives at Kenwood with her father, as they are watched by Elizabeth.

We can see visual similarities between the two films, in their opening sequences, where a young girl is taken from a harbour town to a grandiose estate by carriage (see figs. 2-5). However, Fanny's introduction to Mansfield Park is much darker than Dido's to Kenwood. Fanny is neglected and then mistreated by most. From the beginning, Dido's life in Kenwood is painted as a happy picture of sisterly friendship. In this manner, I find an even greater likeness between Dido's carriage ride and Fanny's second carriage ride to Mansfield Park. This time, she travels with Edmund and they share a moment of controlled intimacy in the privacy of the vehicle.[37] The tone in this third act scene is more joyous, and shared with another male character, just as Dido was accompanied by her father. Even though in *Mansfield Park* slavery is talked about, it is not fleshed out through an acknowledgement of enslaved people. But in Austen's unfinished project *Sanditon*,

[37] Edmund and Fanny are childhood friends, whose relationship grows into romantic love. In this carriage scene they confess they have missed each other after a period apart. Still, at this point Edmund is engaged to Mary Crawford, thus their behaviour does not escalate beyond holding hands.

we do get the first black character in her literary universe. The character of Miss Lambe[38] may bear some similarity to Dido, as a "half-Mulatto" heiress that came from the West Indies to England to complete her education (Byrne 251). Overall, *Mansfield Park* seems to be Austen's work with greatest influence on *Belle*. What is more, Rozema's 1999 adaptation elevates the passing mentions of slavery, with a scene where young Fanny sees a slave ship while she travels to Mansfield Park, and in another scene, where she finds Tom Bertrand's drawings depicting violence and rape against the family's slaves.

Belle is, importantly, based on true events and real individuals, although these elements were deployed and built upon to create an engaging story, which was inevitable since not much is known about Dido's personal life. Moreover, *Belle* depicts and discusses historical events, like the Zong case, and cultural issues, namely the slave trade and English society's opinions on it. As a film that incorporates slavery and race, *Belle* is more than just a heritage piece, especially considering these elements have not yet been featured within this genre. In literature about cinema there seems to be a stark distinction between heritage film and black film, since the two do not overlap. In works defining constructs in film, black cinema usually has a separate section, and certainly the examples used to demonstrate and study heritage are, normally, films with white characters. This is problematic when looking at a film like *Belle*, a heritage piece which discusses race, representation and the slave trade in Britain, among other issues. This begs the question, is *Belle* a heritage film, a "black" film or can it be both? In recent years, we have witnessed a slow rise in works which acknowledge the long black presence in the British Isles, and the general existence of non-white people in British history. Of note is the 2011 adaptation

[38] See Baugh for an analysis of Miss Lambe and how Austen subverts and criticizes the expectations regarding a black heiress.

of *Wuthering Heights*, where Heathcliff is played by a black actor[39] and *Victoria & Abdul* (2017), about the friendship between Queen Victoria and an Indian servant.[40] In comparing these two examples and *Belle*, there is a refreshing quality to the latter, for the protagonist who is non-white and a woman, is in addition, higher in status and wealth than her partner of the opposite sex, John Davinier, and even higher in wealth than Oliver Ashford. Conversely, Heathcliff and Abdul are considerably lower in the class system when compared to the women they are paired with. This reversal in gender and power is an important one, for it places Dido in a privileged position, yet she is also vulnerable to men who seek social or monetary ascension, like the Ashfords. Furthermore, *Belle* is a film made primarily by black women, specifically the director and the screenwriter. Besides them, many others behind the scenes are also female. As such, *Belle* can be considered in three categories according to film theory: heritage, black cinema and women's cinema; however, these categories do not seem to coincide.

One way of approaching labels is by looking at how film literature treats them. In *Cinema Studies, The Key Concepts* (2013) by Susan Hayward, we find and entry named "Black Cinema – UK" (page 36) and another named "Melodrama and women's films" (page 228). In Brian McFarlane's *The Encyclopedia of British Film* (2013), again there is one entry titled "Black representation in British Film" (page 74) and, on page 837, we can find three entries regarding women film-makers and women in film. Concerning heritage film, in Higson's book *English Heritage, English Cinema* (2008), a filmography is included with all the films discussed or referenced throughout the work, and only a minority have prominent non-white characters or subjects. In *British National Cinema*

[39] In Emily Brontë's novel, Heathcliff is described as darker in skin tone, but as a gipsy. So, the choice to portray him as a man of African origin is certainly interesting and not historically implausible.
[40] This film is an adaptation of the book *Victoria & Abdul: The True Story of the Queen's Closest Confidant* (2010) by Shrabani Basu.

(2009) by Sarah Street, from page 229 to 231, we have a small section regarding Black British Cinema, which is part of chapter 8, "Borderlines II: counter-cinema and independence". In this chapter, Street explores different genres which subvert the more mainstream style in British film, generally not as concerned with issues of race, sexual orientation or gender politics, especially not in conjunction. Clearly, when it comes to writing about film there is a significant lack of intersectionality, or even a presence of segregation in definitions of cinematic genres.

All in all, one of the best fitting categories for *Belle*, excluding heritage, is women's cinema. An attempt to define it can be found in Alison Butler's *Women's Cinema, The Contested Screen* (2002):

> Women's cinema is a notoriously difficult concept to define. It suggests, without clarity, films that might be made by, addressed to, or concerned with women, or all three. It is neither a genre nor a movement in film history, it has no single lineage of its own, no national boundaries, no filmic or aesthetic specificity, but traverses and negotiates cinematic and cultural traditions and critical and political debates. (1)

As it becomes clear, to define precisely what is women's cinema is very difficult. However, Butler's broad definition has its benefits, since it leaves a lot of space for diversity and experimentation. But, considering the ideas posited by Butler, *Belle* belongs no doubt to the label in its all-encompassing sense. While a category like "women's cinema" is immensely broad, others here discussed are not. Usually, intersectionality is not considered, in a way that makes *Belle* hard to define, because there is no label that can contain everything this film is about. However, I believe the most relevant trait about the making of this film that crosses boundaries and stands out is how it tackles the issue

of a female perspective on being black, or non-white, in a white environment. *Belle* achieves this in front of and behind the camera. As Street writes:

> There have been very few women directors in Britain, a gender bias which has exercised an undoubted influence on British cinema. […] There is no doubt that the majority of cinematic representations of the feminine have been articulated from a textual standpoint of masculinist anxiety, through which feminine spectators must chart their course. (242)

Certainly, in the tradition of heritage films, women are at the forefront, since they are often the main character and target audience.[41] However, behind the scenes, women remain less present in comparison to men, despite the fact that women have been working in film for a very long time (McFarlane 837). There is an important gap between the subject and audience, and the author of the work. Regarding black representation in British film, McFarlane explains that although "often overlooked or simply ignored, black actors and film-makers have been working in British films right through the first century of cinema" (74). From these reflections, we can conclude that women of colour are critically underrepresented on film and moreover their professional role in cinema is also forgotten and ostracized. By simply reading the definitions quoted above, the idea that "black" and "woman" are separate notions emerges, which is perhaps the root of the problem – a lack of intersectionality. The consensus seems to be that you must either be one or the other, but being both is too much. Nevertheless, these intricacies make *Belle* a piece of cinema which defies genres and film categories in a manner rarely seen.

The screenplay of *Belle* is constructed to transmit the complexity of Dido's position in English society. Through themes such as race, gender and class, in interaction

[41] See Monk.

– or intersection – with each other, the identity of Dido is gradually formed before our eyes. As she declared when interviewed,[42] Asante wanted Dido to be visibly a mixture of black and white, because she is at the intersection or junction of race and status. She is the child of a white aristocrat father and an enslaved mother. Hence, Dido's physical features represent intersectionality literally, but they also represent her threshold identity at a symbolic level. In fact, the story of *Belle* is all about the issue of intersecting elements, embodied in the characters of Dido and Elizabeth. As females in English high society, they would have to marry a gentleman who would equal their status or elevate it. However, a twist occurs when Dido inherits her father's money. Initially, we see how Lord and Lady Mansfield worried that Dido would not find a decent husband, because her maternal side would prevent it or attract ill intent. But now an heiress, she has security. On the contrary, Elizabeth, with no money of her own, depends on finding a good match in order to support herself.

The question of class and race comes into play with the Ashfords, an ingeniously fictionalized family. Firstly, they consider Elizabeth as suited for marriage, she is the "English rose" and has status and wealth, or so they thought, whereas Dido is too black for a wife. However, tables turn when lady Ashford finds out Elizabeth is to inherit no money from her father, and the match between her and James is off the table. Elizabeth is thus more vulnerable to the will of men, because of her economic fragility. With this new scenario, the Ashfords look at Dido as their ticket to higher status and wealth, and they pursue the connection between Oliver and Dido, "sacrificing" their bigoted disapproval of her ethnicity. Now Dido has gained a fiancé, something no one expected, and she is quite pleased with this, as it corresponds to her socially-constructed idea of what a lady should do. Only later does she realise the peril of the marriage, as she is being

[42] See minute 11 of Amma Asante's interview at Talks at Google.

used for her money by a family who find her mother abominable. Dido poignantly confronts Lady Ashford and Oliver:

> You view my circumstances as unfortunate, though I cannot claim even a portion of the misfortune of those to whom I most closely resemble. My greatest misfortune would be to marry into a family who will carry me as their shame – as I have been required to carry my own mother. Her apparent crime, to be born negro, and mine – to be the evidence. Since I wish to deny her no more than I wish to deny myself, you will pardon me for wanting a husband who feels 'forgiveness' of my bloodline is both unnecessary and without grace. (Sagay 89)

Previously we have discussed how *Belle* seems to tick different boxes of film genres. Is it a slavery film, a film about the struggles of women of colour, a film about women's predicament in a patriarchal society or a heritage film? As argued, the genre aspect of the picture is perhaps the most obvious one, for different reasons. Firstly, we have the marketing and publicity side of the equation, with the poster and overall publicity images recalling and reusing the archetypal heritage visual. An important part of the equation according to Ana Cristina Mendes, is the casting of so-called quality actors who are associated with English culture and cinema, wherefore the audience makes a connection between them and how English the production is (127-128). Tom Felton, cast as James Ashford, was made famous as Draco Malfoy in the *Harry Potter* franchise (2001-2011), Mathew Good, cast as John Lindsay, Dido's absent father, is known for *Brideshead Revisited* (2008), *The Imitation Game* (2014) and *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015). Penelope Wilton also starred in *Downton Abbey*, and before that in *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), and Miranda Richardson has had roles in *The Hours* (2001), *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2005), *The Young Victoria* (2009) and *Parade's End* (2012). These are only some examples of well-known English actors, some of whom have participated in the same

English film or series previously. Furthermore, the luscious scenario, intricate set design and wardrobe from another century, also remind one of the heritage style (Mendes 131). These choices, on one hand could be reproached as bait for an already established audience and easy box office revenue; nonetheless, on the other hand, we have to admit that this style of filmmaking was somewhat necessary, because of the historical setting of the narrative based on true facts. There is no denying that *Belle* takes inspiration and is influenced by the vast collection of heritage or period dramas that came before it, as is visible in the common elements of the promotional images (see figs. 6-15).

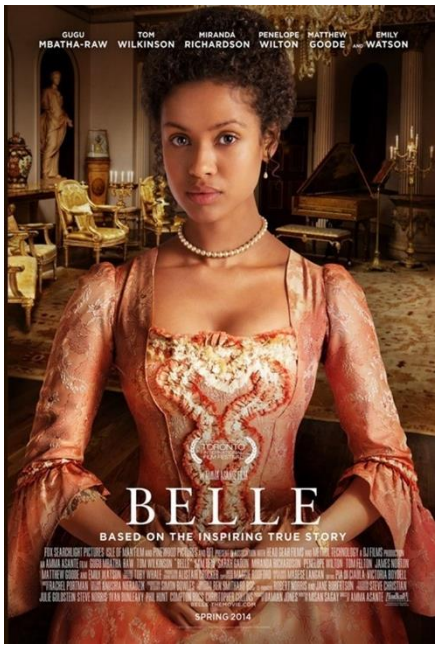

Fig. 6. Film poster of *Belle*.

Fig. 7. DVD cover of *Belle*.

I now make a short analysis of eight film posters of well-known heritage films or series (five of which are Austen adaptations) in order to try to deduce a common visual style used in the promotion of such works. I have chosen four works who came out during the last decade of the twentieth century (figs. 8-11), and four works from the beginning of the following millennium (figs. 12-15).

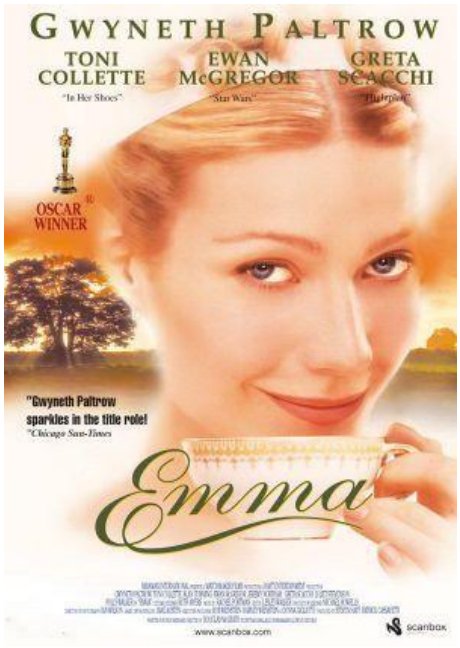

Fig. 8. *Emma* (McGrath 1996)

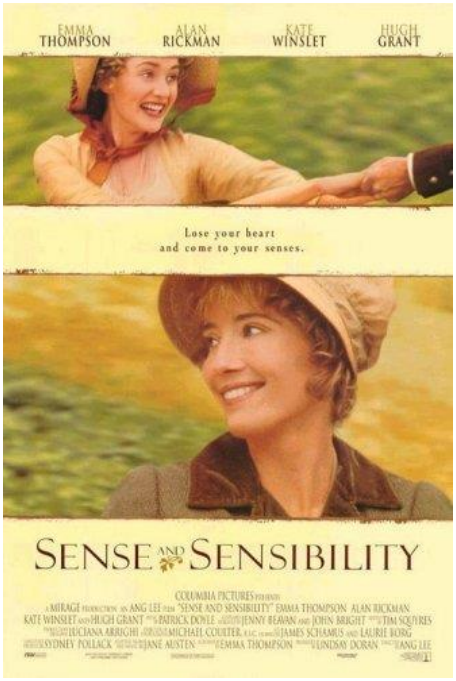

Fig. 9. *Sense and Sensibility* (Lee, 1995)

Fig. 10. *Wuthering Heights* (Kosminsky, 1992)

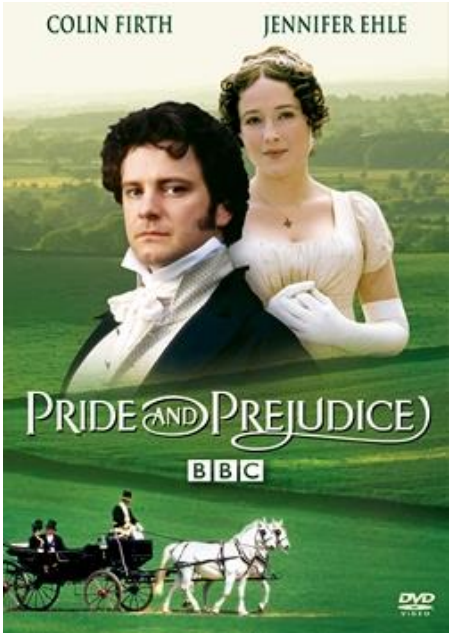

Fig. 11. *Pride and Prejudice* (Langton, 1995)

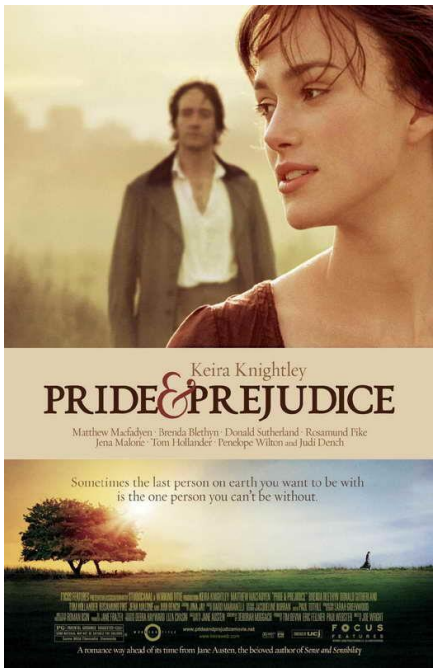

Fig. 12. *Pride and Prejudice* (Wright, 2005)

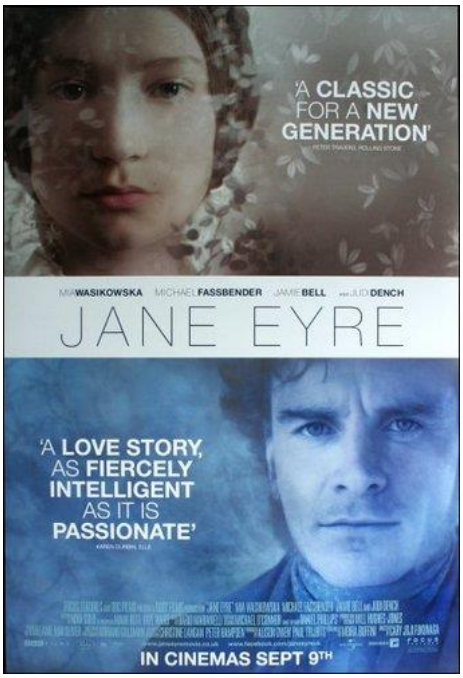

Fig. 13. *Jane Eyre* (Fukunaga, 2011)

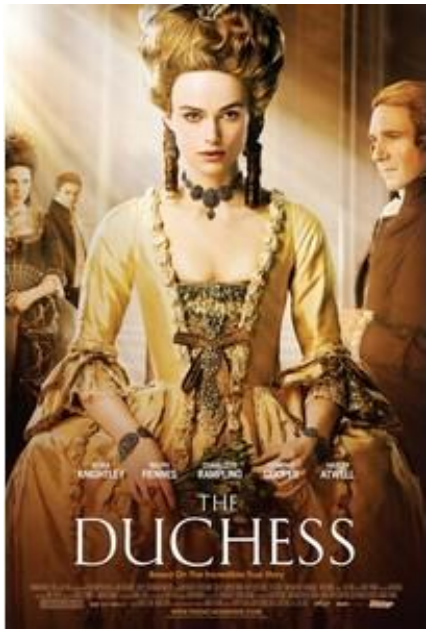

Fig. 14. *The Duchess* (Dibb, 2008)

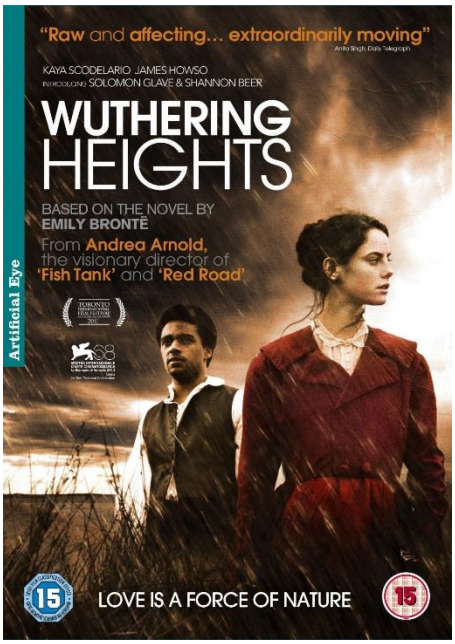

Fig. 15. *Wuthering Heights* (Arnold, 2011)

Fig. 8	**Fig. 9**	**Fig. 10**	**Fig. 11**	**Fig. 12**	**Fig. 13**	**Fig. 14**	**Fig. 15**
Female lead	Female lead	Female lead	Female lead	Female lead	Female lead	Female lead	Female lead
Nature, Country	Nature, country	Nature, country	Nature, country	Nature, country	Mix of patterns	Indoors	Nature, country
No other characters	Male lead, other characters	Male lead, other characters	Male lead, other characters	Male lead, other characters	Male lead, other characters	Male lead, other characters	Male lead, other characters
Yellow	Yellow, green	Dark colours	Green, white	Yellow, green	Blue, cold colours	Yellow	Dark colours

Table 1

Analysis of film posters – category of each line from top to bottom: gender of lead character represented, image background and surroundings, presence or absence of a male lead or other characters, main colours of the poster.

Clearly many of these film posters have similar features (see table 1), the main ones being the presence of the female lead, elements of nature and inclusion of other characters especially the male romantic lead. In terms of colours there is quite a lot of variation, which seems to be related to the tone of the film, a more dramatic film has darker or colder colours (like in both adaptions of *Wuthering Heights*), whereas a "lighter" film has brighter colours (like *Emma*). However, this rule does not apply to all, as sometimes the colour scheme seems to be merely a design choice, not related to the type of narrative. Of the eight films chosen, only one, *Wuthering Heights*, includes a non-white character,

highlighting that this picture is from 2011 (fig. 15),[43] the character being Heathcliff, which in this adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* was cast as a black man. Overall, the period drama genre appears to be a homogeneous group or category, in terms of story (often romantic), poster design and races represented. Subsequently, looking at *Belle*'s own images we find "heritage traits" like the focus on the female lead, the presence of green and nature, the presence of the romantic male lead, as well as other characters. Crucially, there is a great similarity between the poster for *The Duchess* and the poster for *Belle* (see figures 14 and 6). It would seem the design for the latter was perhaps inspired by the former's, with the women front and centre, in consonant positions, their sumptuous dresses and hair on display with shades of yellow and gold. On the promotional film release poster for *Belle*, the lush outdoors of Kenwood are replaced by its detailed indoors, but still the elements are reminiscent of the A*ustenesque* style, although this Austen heroine is black. Unlike any of these, *Belle*'s posters and images always feature a black woman, the female lead, after which the film is named. This is unique and, we could argue, ground-breaking.

Relatedly, we need to scrutinise what is sometimes called diversity, or representation in cinema and the visual media in general, for this is, perhaps, the main trait (and most visible one) that sets *Belle* apart from "traditional" heritage film and even British film in a broader way. Although the film adheres to the definition of the genre advanced by Belén Vidal ("the heritage film typically dwells on an iconography of upper-middle class and aristocratic privilege" (8)), *Belle* also contradicts the stereotype, according to which the heritage genre creates "a sense of Englishness according to a certain bourgeois ideal of imperial tradition" (Vidal 9). Heritage cinema has been criticised for serving a nationalistic right-wing agenda (Vidal 14) in conjuncture with supporting a manufactured

[43] This film has been previously addressed on page 42.

vision of England and Great-Britain for touristic purposes (Vidal 15). Accordingly, Vidal states about the heritage film that "its pastiche of the past [is] nothing but a disturbing symptom of our inability to think historically about the present" (17). I argue that *Belle*'s inquiries about race and the placement of a black woman at the centre of a heritage film represent a break from some of the criticised traits of the genre, as the film puts forward themes of the national past which continue to haunt the national present.

In conclusion, *Belle* takes advantage of the established popularity of heritage cinema, by using its most familiar visual and narrative tropes, to then tell a story with much depth and subtle criticism of the genre itself. The film takes advantage of these tropes familiar to the audience in order to subvert them, framing them in questions of race, gender and identity. Considering *Belle* within the tradition of heritage cinema, the film seems to address the problematic cultural constructions heritage is responsible for, and as such *Belle* is an outsider within heritage cinema – it is a threshold film.

4. Black Women in Film

"We women are but the property of gentlemen. And it came into my head that I have been blessed with freedom twice over? As a negro and as a woman?" – these are the words Dido says to John Davinier, pondering about her place as the child of a slave and as a woman. Her life was certainly exceptional, for the time she lived in. Likewise, the character of Dido is an exception in cinema. In recent years, films about black people, or with black main characters have become more and more visible, particularly in Hollywood. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has recognized quite a few of these pictures: *Fruitvale Station* (Coogler, 2013), *The Butler* (Daniels, 2013), *12 Years a Slave* (McQueen, 2013), *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* (Chadwick, 2013), *Selma* (DuVernay, 2014), *Creed* (Coogler, 2015), *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016), *Green Book* (Farrelly, 2018) among others. However, there is something in common with all of these films: they are all stories about men. Women may appear in them, but are often supporting characters, at best, for the protagonist is male, even when he is gay, as is the case in *Moonlight* and *Green Book*. Kellie Carter Jackson explained the nuances of this phenomenon perfectly:

> Each film also subtly sent the message that black men can play great and complex roles, while black women can continue to play marginal-ized roles as their girlfriends or wives. It is rarely, if ever, that we see a film in which a black woman is the central character and her husband or partner plays the sidekick or emotional supporter to her goals. Even in the imaginary world, there is no black Katniss Everdeen of the *Hunger Games* trilogy, who would heroically lead all of the men around her. We continue to only "see" black women in film when their images are

> peripheral—which is another way of saying that black women are barely seen in historical films. (173)

Belle might not be considered a "Hollywood" movie, but it reached audiences in North America, through Fox Searchlight, gaining a wider distribution. One could wonder if *Belle* even fits this category of film, usually historical and slavery-themed. I have argued that it fits this and other categories. The fact is *Belle* aimed[44] to be a mainstream film, a well-received one, even if it never made it to the Oscars.

Notwithstanding, *Belle* is a rare bird. The slave trade is central to the story because of Dido's origins and the Zong case judged by her adoptive father Lord Mansfield, Lord Chief Justice, used as a plot device to question slavery, justice, human rights, and ultimately the morality of a human trade that enriched a country. William Murray, in the end, cannot deny that he loves Dido, and not condemning the slave trade would be wrong, because he knows that slaves are not less than human, they are not cargo, they are people, like Dido. *Belle* is about an educated, intelligent, and beautiful black woman, who escapes an ancestry of slavery, even though some believe the film is "problematic" in its depiction of events (Andrews 450). The common criticism that the filmmakers do not recreate the historical events as they happened or that they built a story on people while adding fictionalized happenings can be justified by the simple fact that the film does not pertain to be an accurate retelling of history, it draws on it.

To understand the importance of *Belle*, let us have a more in-depth look at black women in cinema. In the history of the Academy Awards only five black women have won the award for actress in a supporting role. The first was Hattie McDaniel in 1939,

[44] See "The Genres of Heritage".

for *Gone with the Wind*,[45] and the second was Whoopi Goldberg fifty-one years later. This staggering gap is at first shocking, but then it only reminds us of the poverty of roles for black women. To this point, so far, Halle Berry remains the only black actress to win an Academy Award for actress in a leading role, for *Monster's Ball* (2001). When we compare the number of black women to black men winners of the Oscar for a leading role, the ratio is one to four. Moreover, when talking about slavery films, often based on real stories, the protagonist is nearly always a man, to the point where slavery tales have become synonymous with a man's struggle, not a woman's (cf. Carter Jackson 177). Although the picture is grim, there are signs of progress. According to Carter Jackson, Lupita Nyong'o's character Patsey in *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013), was a refreshing portrayal of a slave woman who is more skilled then her male counterparts, she sticks with the audience, leaving a lasting impression, some would say even more than the male protagonist (181). However, Botshon and Plastas disagree, arguing that Patsey's suffering is used to build up the male lead Solomon Northup's struggle as a slave ("Negro Girl" 177). The authors criticise McQueen's male gaze of the female slave experience: "Steve McQueen trains his lens almost exclusively on women who are raped or turned into concubines, providing the viewer with a narrow understanding of the black female slave experience" ("Negro Girl"175), an assertion reminiscent of the issue of hyper-sexualization of black women discussed in the following chapters. The problems raised by Botshon and Plastas seem to arise mainly from the biased angle of a male director, as such we should value *Belle* as a singular case where black women had control over a black female narrative.

[45] During the Oscars ceremony in 1940, Hattie McDaniel was actually segregated from her white co-stars, forced to sit in the back of the room, ironically that night she would become the first black woman to win an Oscar (Carter Jackson 176).

In the category of slavery films and films with a leading black character, most of them focus on a man, and if there are female characters of importance, they are often stereotypical roles, and not realistic depictions of human beings. Furthermore, in films which do have black women in leading roles, they tend to favour submissive characters, like maids. Not unlike *Django Unchained,* in *Belle,* the leading character is a black woman, who gives the film its name. This uncommon lead character is not submissive, she has a mind of her own, she has agency, and the plot revolves around her; no "white saviour" is assigned to her ("Negro Girl" 179). Furthermore, unlike other more famous films that touch upon slavery, *Belle* does not give the audience a graphic idea of slavery, instead we are given a different take on it, perhaps a more insidious one:

> Because Sagay and Amma Asante elect to interrogate issues of slavery, race, and gender through the lens of a historical costume drama, they are able to point to moments of violence in ways that not only refrain from depictions of assaults against the black female body, but that remind the viewer of aspects of loss that are generally absent from our storytelling. As a domestic narrative focused on the legitimacy of kinship, *Belle* cannily displaces the violence of slavery to the drawing room. ("Negro Girl" 180)

We only hear accounts about the slave ships and the trade, much like people in Britain would have heard. This is simply a subtler manner of approaching the subject, for it has a constantly lingering presence in the story. We can use language to demonstrate this. The word "slave" or any variation of it is used a total of thirty-one times in the film's screenplay, of these twenty-seven are in dialogue.[46] These are just numbers, yet they show

[46] Often more than once in the same page, as is the case for pages 30, 34, 35, 51, 91, 97 and 98. The word "Zong" is present in the following pages: 25, 28, 34, 35, 36, 51, 59, 78 and 92. Of the total nine times "Zong" appears, four are in dialogue (pages 25, 28, 51 and 59). Moreover, the number of times the word "slave" is used per page, in Sagay's screeplay, page 8: 1, page 28: 1, page 30: 2, page 31: 1, page 34 : 2 ,

that *Belle* clearly confronts the question of slavery. Moreover, I believe the film poses a moral question to the viewer, the same that Lord Mansfield must judge: how can people live their lives knowing that what they have is possible through the exploitation, brutalization and enslavement of others? Instead of reaching the audience emotionally through the horror of watching physical violence, *Belle* puts you in Dido's shoes, but also in the place of Mansfield and we are shown different opinions of the slave trade. We learn of those who profited from slavery, the reasons why Mansfield seems sometimes ambivalent or undecided on the issue, perhaps to make one question what one would do in his place. This film is not less poignant for not including scenes of explicit physical violence. For violence is present in less obvious, but not less powerful ways. Verbal violence is there from the beginning, the film does not shy away from racial slurs or names directed at Dido. Sexual violence is also present, through the character of James Ashford, who first makes racist and misogynistic comments about Dido, and later, sexually assaults her in public, without any restraint. The presence of these particular forms of violence is poignant, considering how prevalent they remain. In *Ain't I a Woman*, bell hooks recalls the profuse use of sexual violence against black women "The nakedness of the African female served as constant reminder of her sexual vulnerability. Rape was a common method of torture slavers used to subdue recalcitrant black women" (18). The assault scene in *Belle* references this tradition of exploiting black women's bodies. As Lola Young states "black is aligned to 'dirtiness': sex is also considered 'dirty' and the two combine in notions of black sexuality" (*Fear of the Dark* 39). In spite of this, in the film the label of "dirty" is placed upon the white James Ashford and not on the black woman. The assault scene is not given any hint of the romanticism of sensuality. Often a trait of male directors and filmmakers, sexually violent scenes are given a romantic tone. I wish

page 35 : 3, page 36 : 1, page 39 : 1, page 51 : 2, page 56 : 1, page 57 : 1, page 59 : 1, page 78 : 1, page 90 : 1, page 90 : 1, page 91 : 2, page 94 : 1, page 96 : 1, page 97 : 5, page 98 : 3.

to underline the oddity of the assault scene in *Belle* written by women, in contrast with a male take on similar scenes. According to Nina Philadelphoff-Puren in the essay "Contextualising Consent: the Problem of Rape and Romance":

> […] in the discourse of romance, a woman's power to make or refuse an agreement is continually under threat. She is subject to a constraint not suffered by the (male) individual in the civil sphere, whose ability to enter or terminate agreements is determined by his own autonomy. (34)

We need only to think about certain fairy tales where romance is painted as female submissiveness to a man, such as *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) or *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), to understand the trope of rape as romance is an old one. In Giambattista Basile's version of *Sleeping Beauty, Sun, Moon, and Talia*, the sleeping princess is impregnated with twins. Even when there is no sexual intercourse, in more recent versions of these tales the unconscious women are kissed on the lips by men whom they supposedly love. Importantly, there is no narrative focus on the will of the woman, it is the man who decides. This framing of assault against women continues to be used. The problem present in some films and narratives is that sexual aggression is excused by a male perpetrator who is deemed a hero, therefore if he rapes a woman it is not a crime but a romantic seduction. To show this framing is still in use, Jonathan McIntoshcites the James Bond film *Spectre* (2015) as an example of "predatory manhood": [47]

[47] I am referencing and quoting the essay in video format "Predatory Romance in Harrison Ford Movies" by Jonathan McIntosh (from the YouTube channel Pop Culture Detective). In this essay McIntosh analyses four Harrison Ford films: *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980, Kershner), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984, Spielberg), *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989, Spielberg) and *Blade Runner* (1982, Scott). In each film the author considers a scene where forceful physical contact between the male lead and its romantic female interest happens.

> Again we see the aggressive nature of this scene framed by the film as a form of seduction. The film is telling us that men don't need to listen to women. That they should take what they want, aggressively if necessary. That once coerced, once backed into a corner, women will finally admit they "secretly wanted it all along" even if they said no.

This belief that women do not mean what they say or that they secretly desire unasked for advances is also described by Philadelphoff-Puren as "the enduring belief that women say 'no' when they mean 'yes', a story which continues to be effective during rape trials, despite legislative reforms which have aimed to eliminate it." (32). I conclude that a combination of folklore traditions, cinematic representations and social behaviour combine to create a conjuncture which makes possible the prevalence of sexual violence against women. Patriarchy presupposes the power of the man as greater than the power of the woman, as such a man can do what he wants, it is the man's desire which comes first. If many men, including filmmakers, feel it is normal to depict sexual aggression as romantic then we should not be surprised if in real life men feel they are entitled to have women as they want and when they want. I wish to note that it is an author's or filmmaker's responsibility to be aware of how such scenes are scored and framed and how they will be perceived by the audience. As such, *Belle* serves an example of a scene of sexual and racial violence which does note glamourize or romanticize these issues.

By and large, one of the most important characteristics of *Belle*, in terms of its originality and perspicacity, is the fact that it is a story about a black woman who is neither poor nor fully subjugated. Even though her mother was a slave, Dido does not grow up as one. As such, she is in many ways the opposite of the stereotypical black female

character we have seen in the past. A rarity, and a privilege acknowledged by herself: “I cannot claim even a portion of the misfortune of those to whom I most closely resemble.”

5. Amma Asante's *Belle*

5.1 Plot and Context

The film begins by setting up the story of Dido Elizabeth Belle in a historical context. The caption "England 1766" on a black background is followed by images of a white man coming to pick up a little girl, with curly hair and brown skin, from a shabby house on the docks. The man is Captain Sir John Lindsay. He brings the illegitimate daughter he fathered with a slave, Dido, to Kenwood, the house of his uncle, Lord Mansfield. When the Mansfields first see the child, they are taken aback by the fact that she is "black", as they put it. Their initial reaction is fuelled mainly by their concern for what society will say and think of the "negro" niece of the Lord Chief Justice of England. During this period society was not accepting of Africans as equals or of inter-racial intercourse, as Robert J. C. Young writes:

> The question had first been broached in the eighteenth century when the different varieties of human beings had been classed as part of the animal kingdom according to the hierarchical scale of the Great Chain of Being. Predictably the African was placed at the bottom of the human family, next to the ape, and there was some discussion on whether the African should be categorized as belonging to the species of the ape or of the human. (6)

Originally, ideas of race were related to classifying different humans like different animal species. As Young further explains "From the 1840s onwards, the question of species, and therefore hybridity, was always placed at the centre of discussion" (7). The issue of interracial or interspecies sex was a major one. With Edward Long's publication of the *History of Jamaica*, in 1774, the road was paved for racial theories. In this influential work, Long (1734-1813) speaks of racial contamination and states the belief that whites

and blacks constitute different species. Long also focuses on the sexual preference of white men for black women in the colonies, as Young refers that "the controlling power relation between slave-owner and slave was eroticized" (142). Questions of hybridity continued to be a topic well into the nineteenth century. Initially, many like Long and Charles White (1728-1813) believed, influenced by the study of animals, that products of hybridity would be infertile (Young 6-7). However, this was difficult to prove since mixed children were abundant in the colonies. But real-life evidence did not deter racial purists, and the new theory declared that "though unions between white and black evidently produced fertile offspring, such fertility declined through the generations" (Young 7).

Beyond pseudo-scientific claims, race theories made a distinction between black and white, where the former is savage and the latter is civilized, making the white "superior". This idea helped justify the enslavement of Africans since they actually "needed" to be owned or mastered by another because of their wildness, as part of the civilizing mission of Enlightenment (Young 44). In spite of all this, Dido stays at Kenwood House, where she grows up with her white cousin Elizabeth, in what is portrayed as a caring family. When both girls turn into young women, under the care of the Mansfields and their aunt Lady Mary, the action begins to unfold. Dido becomes an heiress, after her father dies, which puts her in a particular position, as a financially independent woman, unlike Elizabeth, although she is still illegitimate and black, unlike Elizabeth, who nevertheless is less financially stable.

It is not long after that an event of great excitement is upon the cousins. A dinner with young men as guests: the Ashford brothers. It is on this night that two main story lines begin. Firstly, the potential couples Elizabeth and James Ashford, and Dido and Oliver Ashford are formed, and secondly, Dido meets John Davinier, the clergyman's son, for the first time. Because of propriety, Dido only joins the party after dinner, it is

while she waits that she accidentally makes the acquaintance of John, who comes to deliver a letter to Lord Mansfield. This is a fact proven by an account about Dido at Kenwood that clearly influenced the film *Belle*. Thomas Hutchinson (1711-1780), an American loyalist, described in his diary a dinner with the Mansfields on the 29th of August 1779, this description is worth quoting at length:

> Lady Mansfield must be about 80 . . . has the powers of her mind still firm, without marks of decay; her dress perfectly simple and becoming her age — is said to be benevolent and charitable to the poor. Lady Say, of the same age I saw at court with her head as high dressed as the young Duchesses etc. What a carricature she looked like! How pleasing, because natural, Lady Mansfield's appearance. A Black came in after dinner and sat with the ladies and after coffee, walked with the company in the gardens, one of the young ladies having her arm within the other. She had a very high cap and her wool was much frizzled in her neck, but not enough to answer the large curls now in fashion. She is neither handsome nor genteel — pert enough. I knew her history before, but My Lord mentioned it again. Sir John Lindsay having taken her mother prisoner in a Spanish vessel, brought her to England where she was delivered of this girl, of which she was then with child, and which was taken care of by Lord M., and has been educated by his family. He calls her Dido, which I suppose is all the name she has. He knows he has been reproached for showing fondness for her —I dare say not criminal. A few years ago there was a cause before his Lordship bro't by a Black for recovery of his liberty. A Jamaica planter being asked what judgement his Ldship would give? "No doubt" he answered "He will be set free, for Lord Mansfield keeps a Black in his house which governs him and the whole family." (276)

In the chapter "A Visitor from Boston", Byrne undertakes an extensive analysis of Hutchinson's remarks and the circumstances surrounding them. I highlight the following breakdown of the above quote:

> Hutchinson is deviously suggesting what he purports to deny: he cannot bear to imagine an innocent, loving, familial relationship between Mansfield and Dido, so he fantasises that it all comes down to sex – a vile thought, given that Mansfield was seventy-four at the time, and Dido a teenager. The slur also feeds in to the bigoted view of the sexual voracity of black women: she is 'pert', she hangs on every word that Mansfield says, she controls him. (178-179)

Public opinion about Lord Mansfield was not always favourable, as many believed that Dido influenced his decisions in court. Here, Hutchinson links her influence to a seduction of her great-uncle. It is not surprising to find opinions like Hutchinson's in this context. The Ashford family embodies this very ideology. Dido is a black woman, but she is also a mixed-race woman, therefore she is reminiscent of the racial dynamics in the West Indies. It is James Ashford that utters while gazing at the sister cousins, Dido and Elizabeth: "One does not make a wife of the rare and exotic, Oliver. One samples it on the cotton fields of the Indies. Then finds a pure ENGLISH[48] rose to decorate one's home". Although born in England, to this man Dido inevitably represents the object of the white man's unbound pursuit of desire. In the chapter "Eating the Other" from *Black Looks* (1992), bell hooks elucidates: "Certainly from the standpoint of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the hope is that desires for the 'primitive' or fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited, and that such exploitation will occur in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the status quo" (22).

[48] Upper case as used by Sagay (19).

Soon afterwards, we witness the inception of the sisters' portrait, commissioned by Lord Mansfield. Dido is quite apprehensive about this, as she has lived surrounded by degrading depictions of black people. John Davinier ends up becoming a student of Lord Mansfield, and slowly he and Dido come to form a bond, specifically through a shared interest in the Zong case. This polemic trial over which Mansfield will preside, is about a slave ship named Zong, who threw overboard a portion of its slaves, as they were diseased. The captain of the ship wants to claim the insurance money for the lost cargo, but the insurers refuse to pay. When Lord Mansfield finds out that John was communicating with Dido about this subject their apprenticeship comes to an abrupt end, for Mansfield is overly worried with protecting Dido from the topic. In spite of this, John and Dido will continue to see each other. They have a surprise meeting at a night party in Vauxhall, which Dido attends with Oliver Ashford. On this night, Dido begins to become colder towards Oliver after a disparaging remark he makes about her mother: "He (James) cannot overlook your mother's origins, as I do. Foolish. Why should anyone even pay her regard when your better half has equipped you so well with loveliness and privilege".

This ideology is informed by the Enlightenment movement which not only embodied a scientific interest in categorizing humans, but also placed the British (or Europe) as the pinnacle of civility. In *The British Empire* (2001), Jane Samson compiles writings and documents in order to illustrate each century of British expansion. Regarding the new eighteenth-century, she writes "The Empire was also becoming an empire of knowledge, where everything from coastlines and wind patterns to animals and plants was being observed, catalogued and analysed" (54). This scientific curiosity of the *Lumières* extended itself to other peoples deemed less civilized than the civilizer, therefore creating a strong dichotomy:

> From the first, then, the concept embedded in the term Christian seems to have conveyed much of the idea and feeling of we as against they: to be Christian was to be civilized rather than barbarous, English rather than African, white rather than black. (Samson 38)

A supporter of such ideas, Montesquieu (1689-1755) implied "that slavery could be justified on economic grounds (sugar), moral grounds (pity), and natural grounds (black faces and flat noses)" (Hannaford 199). In Montesquieu's notions we also find the concept of racial inferiority based on physical and mental attributes. As much as science may today disprove such theories they prevail as cultural realities, as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin declare in the introduction to the section "Race" in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (2006):

> It is now beyond contest that race, as it was conceived in the high period of imperialism – as a set of irreducible differences within the human species – is a scientific fallacy. But as a social phenomenon its continuing force resides not in existence as a meaningful scientific taxonomy but in its undoubted effects on behaviour and on policy in many societies. (211)

After Oliver's unpleasant remarks Dido runs off to find John, in order to apologize for his expulsion from Kenwood. They share their mutual admiration for each other. He speaks with passion: "I am saying that no man may have the value of cargo! Human beings cannot be priced, since we are priceless! Free men and slaves alike!". Never before had Dido heard someone proclaim such a deep aversion to inequality and slavery as John did. She then agrees with the following words: "It is the shame of a law that would uphold a financial transaction upon that atrocity". They part, but not without John telling her about the Inn where he usually meets with fellow law students. The Mansfield family is

now in London, as Elizabeth has come out officially. But the Mansfields decide that Dido will not come out, as it would be practically impossible for her to form a bond that would not lower her position, for her origins could attract unwanted suitors. Dido is saddened by this, as she desires to live a life like any other lady, and according to the rules of society, which means finding a husband. Therefore, when Oliver proposes to her, she readily accepts, and it would seem that all she wanted had come true. She has become engaged before Elizabeth. Unfortunately, James falsely leads on Dido's cousin, as we discover he only showed romantic interest in Elizabeth because he believed she was wealthy. In a devastating scene, James assaults Dido and shows how twisted he truly is. All along he was lusting after Dido, but as a result of his bigoted beliefs he sees forming a couple with her as disgusting. In the eyes of many, a woman like Dido is to be regarded as a sexual body with special properties, an enjoyable sweet to taste, but not a respectful lady. This culture of the (black) female as commodity was present in eighteenth-century England and spreads its roots into the twenty-first century:

> When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power over in intimate relations with the Other. (*Black Looks* 23)

In this quote, hooks comments on the way in which we continue to perpetuate racial-sexual stereotypes, by giving the example of a group of white male Yale students she overheard describing what races they would most like to have sex with. Although there is undeniably a fetish for women of colour, there is, paradoxically, a disgust for them or more specifically for racial "hybridity". Both Oliver and James Ashford show themselves to be repulsed by Dido's blackness, her "dirtiness". This can be explained by an imperial

fear of miscegenation based on nationalistic ideas. In *Fear of the Dark* (1996), Lola Young considers the empire as "a metaphorical family" which is threatened by the inclusion of the other:

> One of the reasons that may be posited for the intense emotional responses to interracial relationships is that of a fear of dissolution of the self represented by fusion with the Other. That fusion destabilizes the Manichean dichotomy which has been so meticulously constructed and crafted over centuries. (69)

Dido is the character or figure that symbolizes this dangerous blend. If she is a hybrid this is unacceptable in a society that is built on precise labels. The living proof of racial amalgamation, she disrupts the sterile utopia of England, especially because she is not in a completely subaltern position. As an educated black lady, she is a menace to the system. Crucially, from the different considerations here examined, the overarching theme of exclusivity of identity should be stressed. By this I mean the purposeful exclusion of specific attributes in a definition, for instance of a nation. This is discussed in *Who Sings the Nation-State?* (2007) by Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "If the state is what "binds," it is also clearly what can and does unbind. And if the state binds in the name of the nation, conjuring a certain version of the nation forcibly, if not powerfully, then it also unbinds, releases, expels, banishes" (4-5). Consequently, since difficult to fit into a category, one wonders if Dido is the heathen or the Christian, the black or the English. Although some may be able to see her as a complex individual, Dido cannot truly escape the judgment of a society obsessed by race and sex, an English society, which paints itself white in contrast with the other darker degraded beings, as bell hooks, Lola Young and Robert J. C. Young underline in their work.

Finally, Dido begins to see the unhappiness and danger the Ashford family would bring upon her and Elizabeth, and she urges her cousin to give up on her affection for James. Dido decides to break off her engagement with Oliver, in a scene that only confirms her suspicions about the whole family, as Lady Ashford declares that Dido, as a "mulatto", should be so lucky to marry into her family. The engagement is off, and Dido is free, in a sense, this decision seems to awaken her self-assurance. In one of the secret meetings between John and Dido, Lord Mansfield unexpectedly appears and a heated argument between the two men ensues, culminating with John shouting "I love her!". Dido's guardian is ruthless, to him John will disgrace his daughter. When the painting of Dido and Elizabeth is finished,[49] Dido uses this moment to remind her father of his bravery against the rules that dictate what is right. Meanwhile, the day of the Zong verdict has come and Lord Mansfield prepares to say the words that could change everything. Along with many, John and Dido are present at court, eagerly awaiting the judgement. Lord Mansfield declares in favour of the insurers, but not before stating: "It is my opinion, that the state of slavery is so odious a position that nothing may support it. Justice be done, though the heavens may fall". The film ends with Lord Mansfield blessing the union of the couple outside the building where the trial took place, as he takes John back as an apprentice. Dido expresses that she wants to marry John, who can hardly believe it. They kiss and embrace each other, as the camera pans further and further away from them, until they are but two more figures on a London street.

5.2 Visual Storytelling

I make use of the chronotope of the threshold, according to Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, specifically, as a tool to analyse *Belle*. In his book *The Dialogical Imagination*,

[49] Bear in mind that the composition of the portrait is shown throughout the narrative.

first published in 1975, Bakhtin explains that the artistic chronotope (meaning literally 'time' and 'space' together) stands for the "inseparability of space and time", since the two form a whole, in such a way that time becomes visible and space is charged with time (84). Thus, the chronotope is the materialization of time and space, and Bakhtin originally conceived it within the literary context. In the context of this dissertation, we shall apply it to film analysis, since these two arts forms are not completely removed from each other.

Bakhtin writes of different chronotopes, however the one that is of interest here is the threshold chronotope. The main character of *Belle* is indeed situated, not through her own will, in different thresholds. She belongs to a priviledged group but not fully, for something about her, prevents society from accepting her completely. This is shown not only in dialogue but also in imagery. According to Bakhtin, the chronotope of threshold can be made apparent through elements such as a staircase or a corridor, as is the case in Dostoevsky's work (248). Interestingly, several scenes of crisis and discovery in *Belle* occur in such places, like the hallway filled with paintings, and the roads through which Dido and John secretly meet, walk and talk. Roads are also places characterized by in-betwennes and, as such, illustrative of the threshold chronotope.[50]

This is examplified in the scenes that follow, where we find a corridor inside Kenwood house, and exterior corridors or passageways in London. I have identified the painting in the Kenwood corridor as *Charles Stanhope, third Earl of Harrington, and a Servant*, 1782, by Sir Joshua Reynolds (see fig. 18). One should here notice the way in which the boy servant looks up to his white master as relevant, and recall that another painting later present in the film also bears this dynamic, as we will see. Here Dido as a

[50] Bakhtin also presents the road as another type of chronotope (*The Dialogic Imagination* 98).

child sees herself in this boy (see figs. 27-28), as she will see herself as an adult woman looking up at another white woman.

Fig. 16. (00:06:18) - Dido and Elizabeth as children in Kenwood's hallway of paintings, featured here for the first time in *Belle*.

Fig. 17. (00:06:45) The painting by Reynolds (see fig. 29) was used in this scene.

Fig. 18. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Charles Stanhope, third Earl of Harrington, and a Servant*. 1782, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, New Haven.

Later in the film, we see John and Dido walking at the back of a inn in London, both their garnments and their environment are dark, making their faces the center of attention (see fig. 19). In another scene, John and Dido walk on a unknown road among anonymous faces (see fig. 20). Note how dimly lit the couple is, when compared to the brightness of the greenery and overall sorroundings. This, paired with the darkness of their clothes creates a contrast, as if they are separate from the world, immersed in their conversation, while they gaze at each other. Overall, these scenes employ the tool of a corridor or passage, to simbolize the threshold journey in a literal sense, as considered by Bakhtin.

Fig. 19. (01:00:57)

Fig. 20. (01:07:03)

Strikingly, when Bakhtin describes the chronotope in the second type of ancient novel, or adventure novel of everyday life, like Christian literature about the life of saints, its fundamental features are described thus: a life of sin, a crisis and a rebirth (111). In this chain of events, the element of metamorphosis is key, as is human identity, the two being the motifs of the story (112). In the film in question, the character arc of Dido is no doubt carried out by an identity crisis, for she is unsure of her place in the world and in her own family. She must go through a transformation (a metamorphosis) from which she emerges stonger and more confident, allowing her to come into her own, facing her adoptive father and her own perilous engagement to Oliver Ashford. In the context of that particular type of novel, Bakhtin writes of the general purpose of transformation:

> Metamorphosis serves as the basis for a method of portraying the whole of an individual's life in its more important moments of *crisis*: for showing *how an individual becomes other than what he was*. We are offered various sharply differing images of one and the same individual, images that are united in him as

> various epochs and stages in the course of his life. There is no evolution in the strict sense of the word, what we get, rather, is crisis and rebirth. (*The Dialogic* 115)

This transformation through particular significant moments is evident in the three mirror scenes of *Belle*,[51] as it is in the whole plot, for naturally, in order to tell a story one must chose wisely which events to portray, so that the whole of these will create a sense of continuity in change. This story is certainly punctuated by different moments of crisis, and final moments of victory over those hardships. We can also sense that, throughout most of the film, there is a feeling of being on the brink (or threshold), whether it be the brink of acceptance by society, the brink of independence or the brink of love.

This is what Syd Field calls the dramatic need of a character. In his most famous and consequential book, *Screenplay*, first published in 1979, Field defines this dramatic need as "what the character wants to win, gain, get, or achieve during the course of the screenplay" (25). Field laid down the three act structure in film, what he calls the *paradigm of a screenplay*, consisting of Act I (beginning or set-up), Act II (middle or confrontation) and Act III (end or resolution).This dramatic need is crucial to the story because it is what the protagonist is driven to pursue or fulfill when things, people or events stand in the way, in what Field describes as Confrontation or Act II. In this part of the film, the character faces one or more obstacles to his or her dramatic need. This conflict is what creates an actual story, because "All drama is conflict. Without conflict, you have no action; whitout action, you have no character; whitout character, you have no story; and without story, you have no screenplay" (Field 25). The Conflict, the difficulty to seek something, should lead to the Resolution or Act III. In the final part of

[51] The mirror scenes are analysed thoroughly in the section "The Mirror Trilogy".

the film we want to know if the conflict is resolved, if the need is fulfilled and the obstacle overcome. When Field describes what makes a good character the first element is that the character must have a strong and defined dramatic need, and the last is that the character goes through some kind of change, or transformation (Field 63). It is impossible not to see the similarities between Field's theory and Bakhtin's. The threshold chronotope and the crisis are similar to the dramatic need, in that both represent conflict and reaching out for something that you cannot yet attain. Moreover, if Bakhtin considers the transformation or metamorphosis to be the key element, so does Field. This afinity creates a clear link between these two authors from different fields and proves the lasting influence of Bakhtin's work.

Accordingly, throughout the film we find many instances that show the ambiguous place of Dido. For instance, questioning why she cannot join her family for dinner when guests come to Kenwood, she asks: "Papa, how may I be too high in rank to dine with the servants and too low to dine with my own family?". To this, Lord Mansfield replies that dinner is a "formal proceeding" and that "society has a habit of disregarding even one of its own, when opportunity provides". This means that William Murray puts the rules of propriety first, in this case, because there are guests involved, but his final remark shows he is aware that others are quick to outcast a person, even if unfairly. He recognizes the injustice of the situation but, at this point in the story, he is not yet willing to bend the rules that society has put forth. Towards the end of *Belle*, Dido says to Lord Mansfield: "I don't know that I find myself anywhere". In this scene Mansfield had asked Dido if she found herself in the work of Thomas Day, as Dido holds a book of his in that moment. This work seems to be the abolitionist poem *The Dying Negro: A Poetical Epistle*,

published in 1773 by John Bicknell and Thomas Day.[52] Dido's answer in this context means that even though her mother was a slave she has never known that life, and even though her white father was a nobleman she has never trully felt like those of his kind because people see her colour before anything else. Dido seems to be in a constant and perpetual state of inbetweenness, like she is walking through a corridor that never reaches its end. On one end of the corridor is her enslaved mother, and on the other end her wealthy captain father, but being neither of them, she is both at the same time, she embodies the mixture of the two. Naturally, this creates an inner conflict for anyone living in a society that seeks to label people as either one or the other. This creates a psychological struggle to find one's identity, particularly when others are unable to relate to that personal position. Dido is on the real threshold of being seen as a lady, like Elizabeth, but not even being rich can erase her parentage, or her blackness, which in this context will always be seen as negative, something a family like the Ashfords are appalled by and ashamed of. It begins to become clear that Dido is not only aware of herself, she is aware that others see her as unfit, she is therefore doubly conscious.

Besides Dido, we could consider other characters as threshod-bearing, specifically Lord Mansfield, John Davinier and Lady Mary. Lord Mansfield, originally William Murray, is a crucial character in the story and in the history behind the film. A Scostman, Murray had to work hard to become the most powerful judge in Britain, this humble tenacity pared with an outsider view on the high ranks of England seem to prove themselves critical in his decisions. John Davinier's threshold placement is one of his main traits, along with his unshaken morality. Being the son of a clergyman who wants to become a man of the law, he is stepping outside of his roots and dreaming to go beyond

[52] According to Wood, it is "the first significant piece of verse propaganda directed explicitly against the English slave systems" (36). Day was an aboltionist poet, who wrote about a marriage between a slave and a free woman.

what is expected from him. Coming from a more humble background creates a bond between him and Mansfield, whom he admires. And, crucially, this fish out of water identity is a point of connection between him and Dido. Lady Mary, is a character used for mirroring Dido specifically. She talks of having had a male friend, much like John Davinier, but they never married, and she expresses some regret about this. Not having married she becomes a "spinster" who oversees things at Kenwood and takes care of the girls. She is the person Dido may become, and is supposed to replace, as Lady Mary is growing old (Sagay 38). Thus, in her youth she was on the threshold of a life of marital union, but failing to do so, she became the perpetual single lady, a role looked down upon by most. Certainly, Dido seems afraid of following in her, somewhat unfortunate, footsteps.

5.3 The Mirror Trilogy

As previously discussed, the film focuses greatly on Dido's evolution as a person. Her complicated journey from insecure to being on the threshold of self-power, is accomplished by means of a poignant trilogy of mirror scenes, as acknowledged by Asante herself.[53] These three mirror scenes, one per part of the film,[54] symbolize Dido's journey of self-acceptance and empowerment. The first happens after a conversation that had finished on a bitter tone. John is invited to dine at Kenwood, refuses and asks why Dido is separated from her family during meals. He is "confounded"; to this Dido replies: "And well you might be – when the son of clergy is permitted to the table before a lady of the house." Seemingly offended, John asks if this is "a reminder of his place", "No. It is a reminder of mine." replies Dido, clearly emotional. The next shot is of Dido looking

[53] See interview at Talks at Google, at 14 minutes and 47 seconds.
[54] Here we consider that *Belle* can be divided into three major parts, as according to Field.

at a painting[55] in the hallway where the conversation had taken place. Her eyes focus on the black woman kneeling down, looking up to a white woman in an ornate dress, holding a ribbon of flowers. The black woman is dressed simply in white, with a scarf on her head (see fig. 21).

Fig. 21. (00:25:58) The painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds was recreated in the film (see fig. 22).

[55] This painting appears to be a reproduction of *Lady Elizabeth Keppel* from 1762. The version we see in the film bears some differences from the original, since the woman kneeling down is painted without the pearl earrings and necklace she bears in the original. We can wonder if this was done to underline even more the power gap between this possible servant and her mistress.

Fig. 22. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Lady Elizabeth Keppel and a Servant*. ca. 1762, Woburn Abbey, the family seat of the Duke of Bedford.

We then follow Dido into her bedroom. She sits in front of her boudoir, gazing at herself in the mirror. She touches the skin on her hand and face, as if trying to understand it. She wants to tear it off, peal it off, pulling on her chest, which she had beaten with her

fists. She begins to cry, deforming her face as she stares at it, until she covers it with her palms, sobbing, as the camera moves away, lingering on her lonely figure in the dimly lit room (see figs. 23-24).

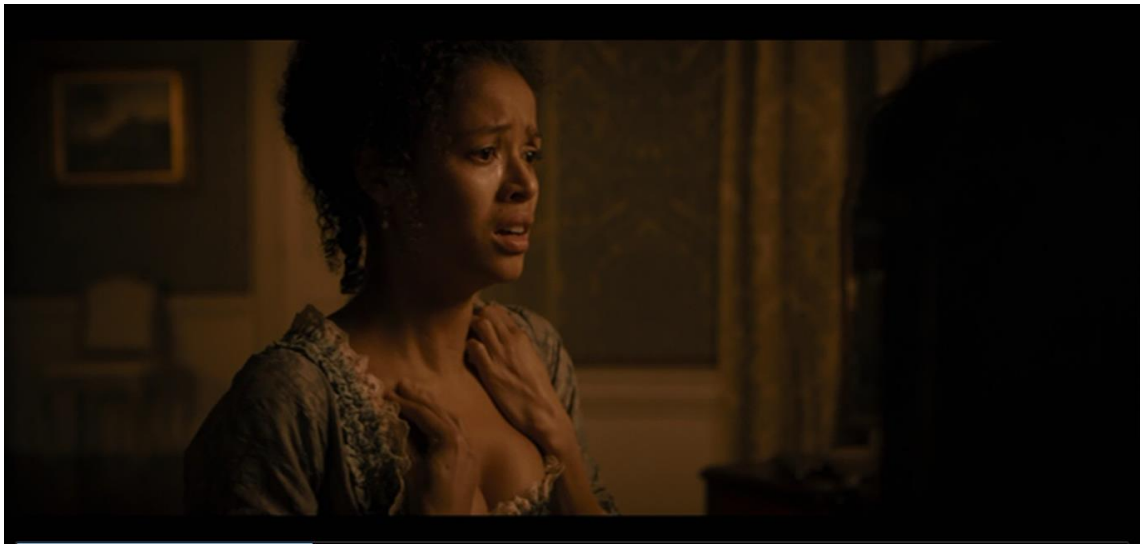

Fig. 23. (00:26:25) Dido looking in the mirror.

Fig. 24. (00:26:42)

This scene is packed with meaning. Dido is obviously aware of her complicated position in the Mansfield household. But this appears to be the first time someone else confronts her about it, which makes her uncomfortable and hurts her deeply. To defend

herself she attacks John's lower social position, which nevertheless, does not prohibit him from dining with her family, when she may not. John Davinier clearly does not take this remark well, and storms off, though later he will recognize Dido's complicated postion and her feelings. This confrontation stirs Dido internally, and it is even more forcefully represented by the black woman on the wall. In this moment we have a paralelism, between Dido an the woman on the painting, as both are in a relative position of inferiority. When looking at herself in the mirror, Dido sees her skin colour, realizing that for others it is a sign or a proof of her heritage and low social status. She cannot hide who her mother was, and the world cannot see past it. The self-harm scene is hard to watch. It represents a journey that begins on a low point, a place of self-hatred, a desire for a radical, impossible change. Overall, in this scene we find in Dido evidence of frustration and self-hatred – she is angry at how she is discriminated, leading her to a dangerous way of dealing with these feelings. This is an early stage of her psychological journey, where her tools are rudimentary and inadequate.

The second mirror scene takes place, more or less, halfway through the film. Although the scene begins with Dido struggling to detangle her hair, it is a moment of growth and hapiness. Now in London, Dido has only just met the family maid. It would seem that she had never had a black servant before, which would explain her surprise and interest in Mabel in the scene prior to this one. In the entrance hall of the house, Dido notices Mabel, the first other black person she has interacted with (besides her mother and the lady that handed her to John Lindsay in the beginning of the film), and Mabel "catches Dido's stare, forcing Dido to avert her gaze quickly" (Sagay 42). We then move into the cousin's joint bedroom. Elizabeth and Dido sit on their beds, in their night-gowns. We see Dido trying to comb her "tight ringlets" while Elizabeth brushes "through her own silken hair" (Sagay 42). This contrast is important, the ease whith which Elizabeth

is able to brush her hair is opposed to the difficulty Dido finds in doing her own. Mabel walks in with socks for the ladies, notices Dido and offers help. Dido seems self-conscious and uneasy, perhaps ashamed of her inability. The scene cuts to Mabel carefully detangling Dido's hair "starting form the ends", as she says. The reflection on the mirror shows Dido and Mabel in the foreground, and Elizabeth in the background looking attentively at them. Mabel utters "My Mam taught me, see?", slowly a smile forms on Dido's lips, she is happy (see fig. 25).

We know little of Dido's biological mother, still we may infer some experiences she might have had as a slave. There is knowledge about the systemic molestation of girls and women aboard slave ships. Believing in their "natural" looseness, and using that as an excuse for attacking them, men expected black women to comply, and if they did not, they would be punished accordingly (Byrne 37). For instance, Olaudah Equiano, tells of the abominable rape of girls younger than ten years old, in his slave narrative, *Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African*, published in 1789, as part of the abolitionist cause. In *Historic Pensacola* (2017), Clune Jr. and Stringfield relate findings about Dido's early life and her mother Maria Belle:

> Maria Belle, a slave acquired by Sir John Lindsay several years prior to his hosting in Pensacola and who apparently accompanied him to Pensacola in 1764. When Lindsay left Pensacola for England in 1765, Belle apparently was with him. Nothing is known of her life in Pensacola from 1764 to 1765. […] While her life in England was lived in the shadows, she probably enjoyed a relatively sheltered and comfortable lifestyle protected and provided for by Lindsay. What is known is that their relationship produced a daughter, Dido Elizabeth Belle who from early childhood lived with Lindsay's uncle, Lord Mansfield (who is credited with

> effectively freeing the slaves in England by his decision in the famous Somerset Case). (110)

We learn that Maria Belle lived with Lindsay first in Pensacola, Florida (at the time British Pensacola) and later went with him to England, where Dido was born. Maria Belle survived, but did not stay in England.

> In January 1774, Lindsay deeded the lot he still owned in the Pensacola navy yard to Maria Belle, described as a "Negro Woman of Pensacola in America but now of London afore and made free." There are bits of evidence to suggest that Maria Belle did return to Pensacola, leaving behind John Lindsay, who had taken a wife, and her daughter, Dido. Seven months after Lindsay deeded Belle a town lot, a woman named Maria Belle paid a manumission price of $200 to one Phillips Comyn in Pensacola, perhaps to cement her freedom in British West Florida. Lindsay stipulated that Belle build a house and fence in the lot, a 1778 map of Pensacola seems to confirm that she did both, as it shows a new house standing on an enclosed lot. (113)

Evidence was found that Captain Lindsay provided the mother of his child with a property in Pensacola, Florida and apparently released her from the status of slave. It would seem Dido's mother did not die or disappear, as it is suggested in the film and in the book by Paula Byrne. Archaeological findings also indicate the presence of different British products and various goods, reflecting an affluent life-style (*Historic Pensacola* 113). As such, it is reassuring to know that Dido's mother seemingly lived a decent life, even if away from her daughter. Still, the notions about the life of a female slave are extremely pertinent and valuable, as we may suppose Dido's mother had similar experiences.

Fig. 25. (00:37:26)

This is a crucial moment for Dido and for the plot. Our heroine is experiencing a moment of intimacy, as taking care of hair would be something a mother and daughter would do together; but in this case what is implied is that Dido never had had that. Mabel serves as a surrogate for Dido's lost mother, as is clealry referenced in Mabel's line. Moreover, Dido feels Mabel can relate to her and she to Mabel, in a manner that Elizabeth cannot. Thus, Dido starts to slowly come into her own, perhaps feeling better about herself, in contrast to the self-hate she displayed in the first mirror scene. In terms of the storyline, we have come to a turning point in Dido's journey of self-discovery. From this moment on we will witness a path towards empowerment and confidence, that will ultimately bring about decisions that will define Dido's future.

The final and third mirror scene takes place during the final part of the film and it precedes the climax or culmination of the story. Dido is currently engaged to Oliver Ashford. However, she was recently assaulted by his brother James during a picnic, where Elizabeth, Lady Mansfield and many others were present. She is obviously conflicted, for Elizabeth claims to be in love with James, believing he shares this feeling. Dido decides she must tell her sister the truth about Jame's character, for her own good and protection.

This difficult conversation leads to a heated argument between the two women. Elizabeth does not want to believe that James would do such a thing to Dido, saying " He would never touch you! You are beneath him!". When Dido demands her to say what is it that she (Dido) is, one is prepared for the worst. But Elizabeth screams "You are illegitimate!" We feel a disheartening relief. Dido calmly and strongly replies, giving a blow to Elizabeth's jealousy and blindness:

> My mother and father never married – you are correct. But my father acknowledged me as his child. It is yours who refuses to legitimise your position, Bette – that is why you are poor! And that is why it is not me who is beneath Mr James, Bette. It is not me!" (Sagay 82)

Elizabeth is clearly hurt, for deep down she knows Dido spoke the truth, and certainly she feels guilty for the way she spoke to her dear cousin. Dido seems now to come to a moment of realization herself. She looks down at the engagement ring on her finger and takes it off. The scene cuts to Dido gazing at herself on a looking-glass, this time she is alone, like in the first scene, but the mirror and herself are alight, the colours are vivid, as she breathes in and out, standing strong and sure of her decision (see fig. 26). In *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* Fanon proclaims "En aucune façon ma couleur ne doit être ressentie comme une tare" (78) – this is Dido's revelation.

Fig. 26. (01:13:29)

As has been shown, the three scenes are substantially different, in many ways, apart from the one element that unites them – the mirror. The scenes become increasingly shorter, though each is more uplifting in mood than the previous one, there being a crescendo in hope and a decline in pain. Moreover, the first and final scenes are somehow parallel, because Dido is alone in both, even though she is sitting, in the first and seemingly standing in the last, or at least she is weak in the first and powerful in the last, so we have a contrast in tone. The middle scene (the second one) is the most crowded, with three characters, Dido, Mabel and Elizabeth. Importantly, this last scene is a turning point both in the story and in the narrative of the trilogy, because it completes the cycle. By the end, a sense has been created that Dido gained strength and knowledge from other women in order to finally reach a state of mind in which she is confident and able to make decisions about her life. In sum, drawing on Bakhtin's theories, we can clearly find a similarity in Dido's arch and the typical story of crisis that leads to rebirth. The first mirror scene is a devasting one, the heroine of the film is faced with an identity crisis, where she seems to hate herself, feeling displaced. Through the second and third mirror scenes, Dido begins an ascent into self-possession.

5.4 The Crisis Trilogy

Incidently, the first mirror scene is also the first part of this trilogy, being the first real instance of outright pain and suffering in the film. Interestingly, Dido is alone in it, something that will not repeat itself in the scenes that immediately follow.

The second crisis scene takes place at a picnic, on the bankside of the river Thames. All the women in Dido's family are present, as well as the Ashford brothers and other bachelors. Dido walks alone, wandering away from the crowd, without noticing she heads towards an area where James Ashford lays on the grass. He swiftly gets up, strolling in her direction, and begins to tease her in a most unpleasant way: "Miss Lindsay, not Husband hunting, are we? Good Lord, I forgot – you have ensnared my brother. Now is he to share his dining room with you, as well as his bed?" Dido does strike back "Oh, Mr. James, your manners are as poor as your brother's finances". Then James takes a hit towards Elizabeth, right as Dido was beginning to walk away from him: "And you are foolish enough to marry him. I on the other hand have no better use for your impoverished cousin!...Though she does make for rather amusing sport!". Dido is clearly angered, she just realized that her sister's possible fiancé is no honourable man. She can barely take one step away from him when he violently grabs Dido by the arm, "That is painful, sir!" she replies, "Have you never been manhandled?" says James (see fig. 27). Dido's final words are of pronounced disgust "It is not in my repertoire to keep company with beasts." What follows is both painful for Dido and for the viewer, and is best described in Misan Sagay's screenplay:

> He regards her – her disdain reflected in his eyes. His free hand comes up, fingers rest on her lips, then spread, as he crushes her beauty in his hand. Her eyes fill as

he brings her close. So close. She is afraid, angry. She struggles desperately, spirited, both arousing and alarming him. As she tears herself from him. (76)

Fig. 27. (01:05:30)

In order to understand this scene we must remember the cultural and racial ethos of the time. This was a period when African female slaves were regularly raped, partly to humiliate their male counterparts; nonetheless this common attitude towards black women was based on the notion that they were hypersexual (Byrne 45). The sexual stereotyping of Africans or descendants of Africans was often related to the climate or food ingredients, like sugar, who some said made women aroused-like. It was again Montesquieu who described the influence of climate on one's mind and heart as recounted by Hannaford (198-199):

If we travel towards the north, we meet with people who have few vices, many virtues, and a great share of frankness and sincerity. If we draw near the South,

> we fancy ourselves entirely removed from the verge of morality; here the strongest passions are productive of all manner of crimes, each man endeavouring, let the means be what they will, to indulge his inordinate desires. (*The Spirit of the Laws* 102-104)

According to Livesay, in the West Indies the culture regarding mixing was far more liberal than in Britain, in fact there was no prohibition of inter-racial relationships (20-21). There were very few white women on the islands, and white men inevitably pursued women of colour as mistresses, and eventually this became a socially accepted behaviour. This mixing was widely accepted in the West Indies, though always within a patriarchal system, and this created particular notions about colour. According to Livesay, mixed-race women, with "white blood", were also very sexualized, but considered superior in beauty to darker women, they were "lighter" black, and very desired (23-24). Thus, mixed women found themselves in a sort of limbo, for their white heritage made their blackness less degrading, and their black heritage annulled the frigidness of their whiteness. Nonetheless, this "power" still laid upon the fetishized sexuality of women, because this relative privilege was awarded by white men to the women they found most attractive.

Back home in Britain, this way of life was highly condemned, usually blamed on the "sinful nature" of the islands, whose tropical climate inspired depravity in white men (Livesay 16-17). Naturally, mixed children were born on ships and in the West Indies, from the intercourse between white and black, although most of the time it was not consensual. In spite of the knowledge that white and black individuals could produce healthy offspring, theories of racial superiority were still in vogue. In the West Indies, Dido would have been considered most attractive, but on English soil, she was potentially shameful. In Britain, it appears that some were afraid of mixing, since preconceived ideas

existed about the outcome of what an invasion of blacks would do to the "autochthonous" English. This opinion was expressed in 1772 by Edward Long, a Jamaican planter:

> The lower class of women in England, are remarkably fond of the blacks, for reasons too brutal to mention; they would connect themselves with horses and asses, if the laws permitted them. […] thus, in the course of a few generations more, the English blood will become contaminated with this mixture, and from the chances, the ups and downs of life, this alloy may spread so extensively, as even to reach the middle, and then the higher orders of the people, till the whole nation resembles the Portuguese and Moriscos in complexion of skin and baseness of mind. (*Candid Reflections* 48-49)

As such, it is not surprising that a man like James Ashford has particularly bigoted views and feelings towards a woman like Dido, who seems to him a naturally inferior and debauched person. As put forth in "The Mirror Trilogy", this crisis scene has profound impact on Dido, and consequently on Elizabeth who comes to learn about the corruption of the man she believed to be in love with her. In the end, it is James himself who wrecklessly brings ruin upon his own family. Because of his actions Dido eventually breaks the engagement with Oliver, and the Ashfords deservedly loose their bounty.

In the final scene of this trio, we have an intense argument between Dido, Lord Mansfield and John Davinier. The two opponents are the men; here Dido is worried for John and angry at Mansfield for his unfair treatment of John. Lord Mansfield has discovered that the couple had been secretly meeting for some time, so he arranges with his carriage driver to surprise them. Dido and John are caught in the act and a fight arises. "This man's ambitions include you. You will endure shame and risk your position for a man without name, who will sully yours and drag your reputation to the gutter!" exclaims

Mansfield, who wants to protect Dido from a connection that would lower her place in society. It should be noted that Mansfield and John, at one point his apprentice in law, parted in unhappy terms, after Mansfield reprehended the young man for telling Dido about the Zong case. To this attack, John replies that Mansfield has no right to judge him, when he does not even know him: "No! That you will never have! Not until you cease from judging the entire world as those above and those below and begin to see people as PEOPLE! Human beings, who think and feel no more or less than you do!".[56] Emotions are getting out of hand, in such a tight space the three are head to head (see fig. 28). Lord Mansfield now reminds John of a girl promised to marry him, and John yells that this connection is arranged and not one of love, comparing his ambitious aunt to Mansfield. Now the subject of love has been brought up, and Dido's stepfather erupts "Love? You claim love?", whilst Dido stops them from going any further, when their faces come so close they almost clash. John screams, nearly bursting ,"Yes...yes I love her! I love her with every breath I breathe!". Everything stops, silence is sharp in the claustrofobic atmosphere of the carriage.[57] Dido catches this opportunity to protect John from Mansfield's rage, and slowly utters "Go John. You do not deserve this", and he leaves.

[56] Upper case as used by Sagay (84).
[57] We could consider the carriage as another threshold or in-between space, as it travels through space and time.

Fig. 28. (01:14:56)

These scenes show a fascinating evolution, that when explored does not seem to be a simple coincidence. The number of characters involved in each scene is precisely equal to the number of order in the trilogy, the first scene has one character, the second has two and the third has three characters, as if an increasing amount of tension in the conflicts is being enacted.

5.5 Film and Portrait

Perhaps the most relevant aspect in terms of pictorial representation is the painting on which the film is based, attributed to David Martin. Consequently, one question that arises about *Belle* is if we should consider it an adaptation. This interrogation is made for two main reasons. The first being that since this is a heritage film, it would fall within the tradition of this genre for *Belle* to be an adaptation of some sort. The second is that Amma Asante has stated that the idea for the film, hence the origin of the story, is the painting of Dido and Elizabeth, and consequently the historic characters and events related to that

visual representation.[58] In the chapter "Painting and Cinema", from *What Is Cinema?* (2005), André Bazin defends the value of painting in cinema as it can introduce art to many who would not know it otherwise:

> Instead of complaining that the cinema cannot give us paintings as they really are, should we not rather marvel that we have at last found an open sesame for the masses to the treasures of the world of art? As a matter of fact there can be virtually no appreciation or aesthetic enjoyment of a painting without some form of prior initiation, without some form of pictorial education that allows the spectator to make that effort of abstraction as a result of which he can clearly distinguish between the mode of existence of the painted surface and of the world that surrounds him. (167)

Accordingly, *Belle* serves as a vehicle for divulging Georgian art by making use of several objects from the period; as such, the audience, even uanaware, is learning and enjoying art without visiting a museum. In spite of the rich artistic references in the film, the answer to the question "is it an adaptation?" lies in whether an image or visual work, in this case a painting from the eighteenth-century, may be considered a text. According to Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), an adaptation is a text (6-7). Moreover, according to the theory of Semiotics we can consider an image as a text, the field of semiotics being concerned with the study of meaning and signs, and therefore with representation. In this perspective, visual representation is what is of importance to the context of both film and painting. As such, we can think of visual art as a sign, as a readable work, and thus as a text (Curtin 56-57). Consequently, there is evidence to

[58] In an interview with *Indiewire*, Asante revealed that the film's producer Damian Jones sent her a postcard with Dido and Elizabeth's portrait on it, and this was when the inspiration for the film took flight.

sustain the possibility of considering *Belle* as an adaptation of a visual text, albeit this may be an unusual curcumstance.

The painting of Dido and Elizabeth informs the two main sites of action in *Belle*. Firstly, Kenwood House, for the cousins are depicted in the grand gardens of Kenwood, and secondly, the city of London, are featured in the painting's background where we see St. Paul's Cathedral, which at the time was indeed visible from Kenwood.[59] Futhermore, the critical sisterly duo of the story, Dido and Elizabeth, is introduced in the painting. The bond of these two main characters is very much at the centre of the action in *Belle*. Moreover, the painting gives its colour scheme to the film, blue, pink, and green being easily discerned as very prominent in a first viewing of *Belle*. Green is heavily present in Kenwood and later in the Ashford garden and the picnic scene. Pink is widely used for the Mansfield universe, as well as in different dresses worn by women in the film, whereas blue is the colour attributed to the Ashfrod universe. Finally, perhaps the most important role of this painting is as a storytelling device. *Belle* opens with the painter preparing the brushes. The film begins with images of the preparation for painting this very canvas, although at the time we do not know how it will come about. Hence, the filmmalkers are foreshadowing the importance of this work of art before we even know it. Indeed, as the plot moves forward, the painting's gradual construction follows it. The creation of the painting, depicted in the film, is used astutely as a symbol for the development of Dido's character and her relationship with John Davinier. This is achieved because this portrait is framed as an important event, that disturbs Dido, when it is contrasted with all the other paintings featuring black characters. When Dido finds out she is to be painted with Elizabeth, she is upset and uncomfortable, not really knowing how to interpret the

[59] Nowadays, when one visits Kenwood, St. Paul's Cathedral is hidden by modern buildings, which at the time the painting was produced were not existent.

situation. This is also when Dido and John have their first formal meeting. At the end, the painting's completion is paired with Dido coming to terms with her identity and her confrontation of Mansfield. Her father, who defied propriety in adopting her and then comissioning her portrait beside her white cousin, must now make a legal decision which ultimately will define his reputation and the lives of many. Dido reminds her papa of all this as they gaze upon this painting, which would stand the test of time, and become the proof of Mansfield's rebellion and Dido's consequence.

The painting is alluded to in the film in scenes where the positioning of the cousins is recreated. In the scenes, stressful situations may be enacted, but the cousins are never pitted against each other as enemies, instead they generally support each other and call attention to realities faced by women, serving the purpose of social commentary or critique. As such, the original sisterly energy of the portrait is of relevance to the plot of the narrative. The first instance of the repetition of the layout of the paiting, Dido on the left and Elizabeth on the right, is when the Asford family dines at Kenwood (see fig. 29). The second instance is, naturally, when the young women pose for their portrait (see fig. 30) and thirdly, when the whole family is having breakfast in London (see fig. 31).

Fig. 29. (00:16:15) Meeting the Asfords after dinner

Fig. 30. (00:28:21) Seating for the portrait.

Fig. 31. (00:49:33) Breakfast in London.

In the third occurrence of this repetitive layout, the dispostion of the four women at the table creates two lines pointing towards Mansfield, placed at the center of the frame. There is a frame within the frame around Lord Mansfield, behind him on the wall. This is meaningful, because he is the "head" of the family and in this scene he will be the focus of Dido's interrogations and anger, regarding issues related to slavery, like the doubt she has over the servant Mabel's freedom status.

There are some scenes in which the positioning of the paiting is mirrored, when this happens there is an underying conflict because of male presence or actions, unlike in the previous examples. Firstly, Lady Mary utters "We shall be receiving visitors for dinner", the camera zooms out, while the *mise-en-scène* of the girls points towards Lady Mary at the center of the frame (see fig. 33). Then, we cut to a mirrored shot, not from the girl's backs, but from Lady Mary's back, when the girl's excitement grows because of the news (see fig. 32). Here, there is a triangular shape formed by the three women, and we could interpret Lady Mary as the peak of the geometry, embodying an older

possible version of the two girls. We may say that Lady Mary is shown to be the care-taker of Dido and Elizabeth, their role model, as implied in the *mise-en-scéne*. Secondly, as the women arrive in London, Elizabeth talks about how lucky Dido is for not depending on a husband to survive, unlike herself (see fig. 34), where their postions are reversed). This monologue is a commentary on the female condition in eighteenth-century England, which permeates the story of the film. Finally, we find the cousins playing the piano (see fig. 35) in the scene of greatest tension between them, as they begin to argue about James Ashford, when Dido reveals the violence of Elizabeth's suitor.

Fig. 32. (00:11:14)

Fig. 33. (00:11:19)

Fig. 34. (00:36:06)

Fig. 35. (01:10:19)

Overall, the numerous recalls the film makes of the painting, including the portrayal of the process of creating the canvas itself, show a self-awareness on the part of the filmmakers and an intent to preserve part of the real-life dynamics of the family, albeit in a romanticized narrative. Above all, the recurrence of the visual references to the portrait sustains the theory that *Belle* may serve as example of an adaptation of a visual text.

Apropos, the film adaptation of Tracy Chevalier's novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999) is a relevant example of a film that deals with a painting of a woman. In fact, the girl depicted by Vermeer and imagined as his servant and love interest has some similarities with Dido. In "Girl with a Pearl Earring: Narrating across Media", Isabel Fernandes argues:

> This utter feminine subordination also becomes apparent in sexual terms, since she becomes the object of desire of three men: of Van Ruijven, Vermeer's patron

> and best customer, of the painter himself, and of Pieter, the son of a meat-stall owner in the local market. (179)

Accordingly, both women come to life from portraits painted by men, as they navigate society and domesticity as women in subaltern-like positions, they are pursued by three male characters,[60] and interestingly in their paintings they are depicted wearing a turban and a pearl-drop earring. Certainly, for Dido the turban bears a different connotation, but still the likeness between these women is of pertinence, showing the potential influence of past films on *Belle*.

5.6 Race and Representation

The relevance of the portrait of Dido and Elizabeth is a central question to this work. In order to understand this painting, we must first understand its context. It is not too surprising to realize that, in European painting, black people are not the main subject. Still, for a background character the black person is depicted in a specific manner.

In the book *The Arts of Living, Europe 1600-1815*, there is a sub-chapter entitled "Africans in European Art". Spanning two pages of text and two pages with images, in approximately 170 pages of content, this work does not give a vastly detailed analysis of representation of black people, but it summarizes it. Crucially, the author Dawn Hoskin writes:

> Africans were active members of European societies, and depictions of African bodies within European art do not adequately reflect their role in the development of Europe. Representations were ideologically and politically influenced, and

[60] Here I consider James Ashford as the third men interested in Dido: although he is not an official love interest, he does demonstrate sexual desire for her.

> therefore reveal more about the complex and fluctuating European attitudes towards Africa than they do about the people they purport to depict. (86)

Hoskin speaks of a discrepancy between artistic representation and real life, considering that in the examples given in this chapter, the African or black subject is either nameless or a mere miniature in a sugar bowl, certainly not a figure of respect or admiration:

> Put simply, black female and male subjects frequently entered Western art through themes involving the representation of enslaved or free blacks. Black women were grieving or distraught slave mothers, kneeling or beseeching slaves or asexualised 'mammies', rather than noble mythological creatures or queenly allegories. (*Black Victorians* 47)

Noteworthy is the fact that, generally, black women are not represented as symbols of beauty, unlike white women used for images of ancient goddesses, and are often depicted as former or current slaves.

In accordance with the time and its penchant for cameos, an essential image of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is the emblem famously used by the Slave Emancipation society, later the Anti-Slavery Society (see fig. 36). Made by Josiah Wedgwood, of Wedgwood Fine China, a popular potter involved in the abolition cause, as the description for the Slave Emancipation Society Seal details in *The Dictionary of Wedgwood* (1985):

> Medallion by Hackwood of 1787 produced by Josiah Wedgwood for the Slave Emancipation Society. It shows a chained negro slave kneeling in a suppliant posture, and it bears the inscription: "Am I not a man and a brother?" Wedgwood played an active part in the affairs of the Society and became a member of the committee. The medallion was taken from the Seal of the Committee, and many

hundreds were made. Some were mounted in gold in the lids of snuff boxes, ladies wore them mounted as bracelets, or as hair ornaments, and the wearing of these cameos became very fashionable. (319)

Fig. 36. Wedgwood, Josiah. *Medallion*. Ca. 1787, Victoria and Albert Museum. White Jasper with a black relief and mounted in gilt-metal.

A female version of the image was also created, with the caption "Am I not a woman and a sister?". This image was used in the Penguin edition of *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave* (2004). A version of the Wedgwood emblem appears in *Belle* (see fig. 48), and is used along with other images to symbolize the subaltern position of the black person. In the scene Dido declares "Just as in life, we are no better in paintings". Although this emblematic image may represent a fight for freedom, it was made by a white man and is reminiscent of the benevolent black. As it was often made to be, the black person, be it male or female, kneels and begs for freedom from the white. It was important to portray black people as subservient, in order to contradict the stereotype of the savage.

However, this choice is problematic, since it removes agency, and thus, reiterates the inferiority and dependence of the black person:

> As the historian Catherine Hall and other scholars have pointed out, the abolitionists, while opposing the racial ideas generated by the pro-slavery lobbies on both sides of the Atlantic, were still as liable as their opponents to see black people as stereotypes. Rather than rejecting the principle of racial stereotyping, they generated an alternative stereotype of their own that was designed to 'counter that of the planters, which represented "*Quashee*" [a black person] as lazy, mendacious, incapable of working without the whip, mentally inferior and sexually depraved.' The abolitionist stereotype of the African was that of 'new black Christian subjects – meek victims of white oppression, grateful to their saviours, ready to be improved and transformed. (Olusoga 258-259)

Fig. 37. (00:59:20) The Wedgewood emblem recreated in *Belle*.

Clearly, black people were not commonly exalted in European or British art. Thus, an image of a black person without a connotation of inferiority is not a common finding.

According to Byrne, the painting of the two cousins is "as far as we know, the only portrait of its era to show a white girl and a black one together in a sisterly pose" (4). She continues by saying that such an image would have been "startling" because of the near equality of the women, since Elizabeth sits with a demure appearance, coiffed with rosebuds, and Dido jumps out with a penetrating gaze. Elizabeth is depicted with an open book, indicating her love of reading. The symbolism in Dido's attire and objects is more complex: on one hand the ostrich feather on her turban, made fashionable by the Duchess of Devonshire,[61] can be a sign of style and boldness; on the other hand, Byrne states:

> The basket of exotic produce points to the black girl's foreign background, with the ripe fruits – grapes and figs and peaches – suggesting her lusciousness. At a literal level, she is carrying fruit that she has picked in the orangery or the hothouse for the dinner table of the big house. But at a metaphoric level she is herself being compared to a sweet foreign fruit flourishing on English soil […] (6)

There seems to be a distinction between Elizabeth, the pure white lady who reads, and the exotic Dido, who carries juicy fruits. We detect a race bias in the different representation of the young women, the white has leisure, the black has field work and a hint of sensuality with the outline of her moving leg (Byrne 8). In addition, there is the possible connotation of blonde hair in women, in this case Elizabeth's hair, as a symbol of white supremacy, according to bell hooks:[62]

> […] the expressed desire of the non-blonde Other for those characteristics that are seen as the quintessential markers of racial aesthetic superiority that perpetuate and uphold white supremacy. In this sense Madonna has much in common with

[61] This is the title character in the film *The Duchess* (Dibb, 2008), which I have referenced as visually similar to *Belle* in terms of film posters.
[62] In chapter 10 of *Black Looks*, hooks writes about the entertainer Madonna and race, specifically her fake blonde hair.

> the masses of black women who suffer from internalized racism and are forever terrorized by a standard of beauty they feel they can never truly embody. (158, 159)

The constructed epitome of beauty as white and blonde is crucial because *Belle*, as we will see, contradicts this message while commenting of the consequences of it. Hence the contrast between Elizabeth's whiteness and Dido's darkness should not go unnoticed. As such, I conclude that although rather progressive for its time, this painting is not free of prejudice and stereotype. As one turns to *Belle*'s depiction of these figures, one notices some salient differences, namely in terms of hair.

Fig. 38. Dido as represented in her only known portrait.

Fig. 39. (01:22:32) The painting recreated in *Belle*.

We may say that today as in the eighteenth-century, hair is a topic of relevance. When comparing the painting of Dido and the one created for the film, what strikes us is that Dido's hair is not covered by a turban (see fig. 38). In the film's version of the painting, Dido's curly hair exists, it is there, it is to be seen (see fig. 39). This is not a coincidence, for in the film her curly hair is part of her journey of self-acceptance. Like many people who possess this texture, Dido finds it can be troublesome or difficult to manage. The struggle she has in detangling or doing her hair was perhaps aggravated because, as is implied in the film, she did not grow up with a woman with a similar hair texture that would have been able to teach her how to take care of it. For this reason, meeting Mabel, the only other black woman in the film, is a remarkable moment, as has been discussed in "The Mirror Trilogy".

Importantly, these are all fictionalized happenings, made for storytelling purposes. Such creative accounts of Dido's personal life are made possible because of the lack of information about her. Arguably, the choice to change Dido's appearance for the

film was maybe another way to honour her mother and reimagine what history did not leave for us to see. But this poses a question: why is Dido's hair covered by a turban in the painting? For this purpose, we should define what is in fact a turban. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it is originally "a man's head covering consisting of a long length of material wound around a cap or the head, worn especially by Sikhs and Muslims". Notably, the turban is a common trait in portraits and conversation pieces,[63] usually worn by the figure of the black servant. There seems to be in the eighteenth century an interesting form of cultural appropriation of Asian and Arabic cultures, which are transferred onto black people, because all who are non-white are put into the category of the exotic, without concern for the complex and diverse cultures that are being lumped together into one single label of exoticness (see fig. 40-42). As Tobin explains:

> This conflation of Arabic, African and Indian origins is typical of many eighteenth-century representations of black servants. What seems to matter is not that these servants are African, Muslim, or Indian, but that they are exotic, that they originate in tropical fertile, and remote lands. Their status as exotics is reinforced by the frequency with which they are associated in prints and paintings with the consumption of foreign luxury goods as sugar, tea, tobacco, and coffee, all commodities associated with the dark others of the world. (27)

[63] A conversation piece being a painting depicting a group engaged in an activity or conversation, according to the glossary of The National Gallery.

Fig. 40. Hogarth, William. *A Harlot's Progress* (*plate 2)*. 1732, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

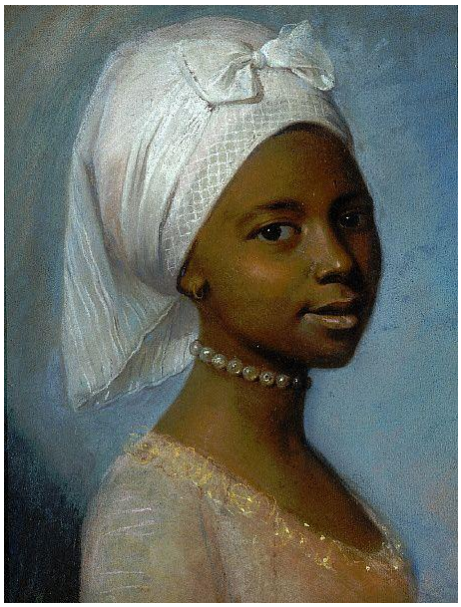

Fig. 41. Liotard, Jean-Étienne (formerly attributed to). *Portrait of a Young Woman*, late eighteenth-century, Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis.

I call attention to William Hogarth's engravings which, according to Márcia Bessa Marques, show an affinity with the dramatic genre, resembling a stage with different characters (149-150). It seems that Hogarth saw people as players in the great stage of life, not unlike Shakespeare.[64] As such, it is intriguing to notice the presence of black figures in exotic dress in the painter's work, because we may see in it an element of comedy but also a depiction of real life. Hogarth may be mocking those who did have black slaves or servants dressed in such extravagant costume. Yet, black servants were not the only ones depicted in this way. Agostino Brunias' works portraying West Indian women were meant to be a taxonomy of the Caribbean people; through clothing he classifies phenotypes. For instance, while the wealthy whites are elegantly dressed, the "mulatresses" are inferior to the whites in terms of richness of attire, but superior to black women or negro women or "wenches" (Tobin 151). Despite the hierarchical separation between mixed, lighter-skinned women and darker women, both are usually represented wearing turbans or a similar piece. After all, they are not "white", so they are not depicted as such, they are differentiated (see fig. 42).

[64] I am referring to the phrase "All the world's a stage" from the play *As You Like It* (1603).

Fig. 42. Brunias, Agostino. *Free Women of Colour with their Children and Servants*. Ca. 1770-1796, Brooklyn Museum, New York.

In visual representation, turbans were typical accessories for those of darker complexion and exotic origins, so the choice to depict Dido wearing one is not that surprising, it is even congruent with the conventions of the time. But we could speculate further about this decision. We cannot say with certainty, if Dido was wearing a turban when she was painted, but we do have information about how she wore her hair otherwise. In the diary passage previously quoted, Thomas Hutchinson attentively critiques Dido's attire, remarking she wore a "very high cap", which, according to Byrne, would have been the latest fashion (177). A cap (see fig. 43) was indeed worn at the time by women, and, unlike the turban, it was not associated with exoticness (see fig. 44). Moreover, according to Hutchinson "her wool was much frizzled in her neck, but not enough to answer the large curls now in fashion". From this sentence I can deduce her hair was showing, and

was apparently too frizzy for Hutchinson, not like the curls women with straight hair would wear, which naturally would be more “perfect” and less tight.

Fig. 43. A cap in exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum, in London. Photo by the author, 25 March 2018.

Fig. 44. Tischbein, Friedrich. *Portrait of a Lady in a White Cap*. 1793, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

From this information, we can infer that Dido probably did not always wear a turban, if she did wear one at all. This was a dinner with a guest, something more special than an everyday meal with the family, an occasion when one would want to look particularly presentable. Therefore, we can assume that what Dido wore that night was what she considered fashionable and in good taste. In a similar way, one would also want to be represented in a portrait in one's best dress. For the dinner she chose a high cap, in fashion for ladies (white ladies), so why would she have chosen a turban for her portrait, the turban being a mark of exoticness, when she seemingly preferred the opposite? These are only speculations, for we do not have enough evidence to claim with certainty what style of hair garment Dido wore most of the time. We should be aware that the painting maybe misleading, for we do know that the turban was not the only accessory Dido wore on her head. Interestingly, Paula Byrne notes an engraving of Kenwood, in which a

woman is represented wearing "white turban and white Indian-style pantaloons, seemingly with gauze-like dress above them. Her face is represented by black shading, in contrast to the white of her dress and head-dress. Examining the figure under a magnifying glass, one is led irresistibly to the conclusion that this could well be a representation of Dido" (172). This engraving by James Heath of a 1786 drawing by Richard Corbould is another possible pictorial representation of Dido. We may wonder if the artist(s) depicted Dido with a turban because there was a tradition of depicting people of colour in turbans. By looking at a number of different paintings from the eighteenth-century and after, one notices that it is very hard to find a black woman whose hair is completely exposed. Is there more to this than the typical marker for otherness? Was this possibly a question of censorship, because the hair is too much, so it should be contained?

Today, unlike 250 years ago, many black women, and people belonging to oppressed groups, can express themselves through social media[65]. This means that if an instance of discrimination occurs a person can decide to denounce it. In giving many a platform to speak, social media has broken a barrier of epistemic violence by providing free tools of communication and publishing to individuals who previously had none. Nowadays, it is possible to curate one's life narrative. In November 2017, the actress Lupita Nyong'o used Instagram to reveal the editing that *Grazia* magazine had done on her hair without her consent, erasing the part of it that was loose and showed its natural texture. She condemned this decision, saying that it was an omission of her heritage, done to fit the magazine's idea of beauty standards, which do not seem to be particularly inclusive (see fig. 45).

[65] Access to the internet and social media platforms is not universal. In certain regimes the internet is censored, in certain cultures it may be forbidden, or impossible to access in remote locations and areas of the globe, or simply because of a lack of resources one may not be able to use the internet at all. Still a majority of people in developed countries has access to the internet.

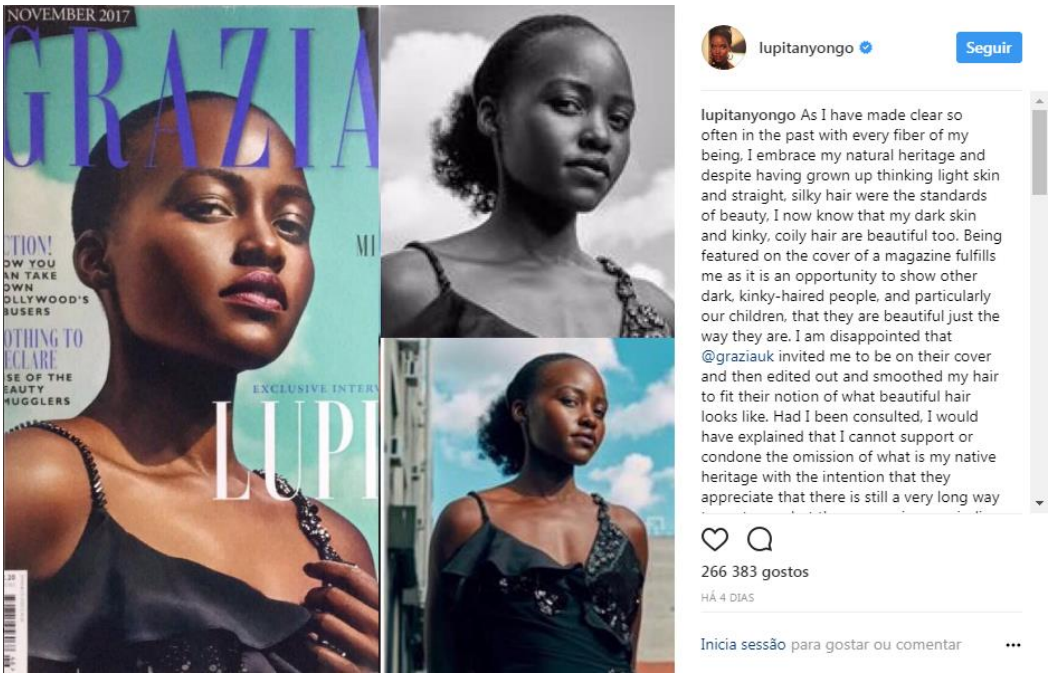

Fig. 45. Post from Lupita Nyong'o's Instagram page.

In the song "Don't Touch My Hair", Solange sings "Don't touch my hair/When it's the feelings I wear/Don't touch my soul/When it's the rhythm I know/Don't touch my crown/They say the vision I've found/Don't touch what's there/When it's the feelings I wear". This powerful song is named after an experience familiar to those of hair that is not considered as natural to "white people",[66] the experience of having others touch your hair, often without permission. Such acts can be considered as an invasion of privacy, and a result of a society that renders invisible non-straight hair, in such a way that it becomes a peculiarity, something of exotic interest. Moreover, we can relate this modern behaviour to a legacy of molestation and exploitation of the female black body, that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was normalised, for instance with the horrific exhibitions of Sarah Baartman (1789-1815), also known as the "Hotentot Venus". This South African woman was paraded naked through Europe like a zoo animal for spectators to examine

[66] I note that this is a generalization, because there are people with dark skin and straight hair, as there are people with fair skin and curly hair.

her physical attributes. Her large figure and behind seemed to shock many. According to Stuart Hall in the chapter "The Spectacle of the Other",[67] she "did not exist as 'a person'. She had been disassembled into her relevant parts. She was 'fetishized' – turned into an object." (266). Ultimately, Baartman was made a symbol of the lewd African woman through her objectified body. As hooks points out in *Black Looks*, this fetish still exists:

> In the sexual Iconography of the traditional black pornographic imagination, the protruding butt is seen as an indication of a heightened sexuality. Contemporary popular music is one of the primary cultural locations for discussions of black sexuality. In song lyrics, "the butt" is talked about in ways that attempt to challenge racist assumptions that suggest it is an ugly sign of inferiority, even as it remains a sexualized sign. (63)

When we consider how often black women's bodies are violated, the song hits a chord. Solange uses the image of her hair and links it to her soul, her feelings, her pride. Part of a wider cultural movement of empowerment and revaluing of natural hair, this song was well-received and even originated a twitter hashtag. Going back to Hutchinson's comments about Dido's hair we are reminded of the good hair, bad hair dichotomy: "'Bad' hair speaks to the texture of tightly coiled black hair that is juxtaposed with straighter hair, otherwise known as "good" hair" (Banks 13). Once again, hooks speaks of this issue in the late twentieth century:

> Currently, black models whose hair is not straightened are often photographed wearing straight wigs; this seems to be especially the case if the models' features are unconventional, i.e., if she has large lips or particularly dark skin, which is not often featured in the magazine. (*Black Looks* 71)

[67] From the book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997).

The recent wave of support for natural hair, hair that is not straightened or relaxed, is a positive movement which combats a legacy of forced conformity to white standards, note the case Lupita Nyong'o calls to attention. Still, a group of behaviours that we may link to a problem of self-hatred, conscious or subconscious, remains in existence. Aware of it or not, being surrounded with images of beauty which do not correspond to one's phenotype can impact one's self-image. As such, one can feel forced to succumb to this beauty ideal, forsaking one's natural features. This is precisely what Fanon writes about in *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, when he claims there is a desire to whiten oneself: "J'épouse la culture blanche, la beauté blanche, la blancheur blanche" (61).

Thirty-one years after the death of Dido Elizabeth Belle, Fanny Eaton (1829-1904), who would become one of many Pre-Raphaelite models, was born. A mixed-race woman from Jamaica who died in London, she was normally depicted with her hair showing, which contradicts the hair covering trend discussed in this chapter (see fig. 46). While she corresponded to the Pre-Raphaelites aesthetic ideals, she was praised for her beauty during the Victorian age, a time when the standard of beauty was very much white (Olivares 145). Thus, we may see Eaton as a woman following in the footsteps of Dido who paved a new path for black women in representation. To give a current example regarding hair I turn to the British writer and journalist Afua Hirsch, who writes of her own experiences regarding how her hair was perceived, in her first book *Brit(ish), On Race, Identity and Belonging* (2018). The bullying Hirsch suffered as a child comes to show that even though curly hair, a mark of otherness, is now perhaps less hidden, it still denounces one's difference, and some will use that to attack and mock (10).

I conclude that the texture of hair common for people of African origin continues to be stigmatized and considered less beautiful. Hence, the decision to show Dido's hair

in the film is not devoid of meaning, it is a statement which counteracts the old tradition of rejecting and hiding black hair, other hair.

Fig. 46. Sandys, Frederick. *Study for the Head of Morgan le Fay*. Ca.1862, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

5.6 Wardrobe, Colour and Sound

This section aims to showcase the richness and proliferation of techniques used to tell this story through colour (originally used for painting or drawing purposes) and *mise-en-scène*. We shall look at a number of examples from the film in which details are carefully utilised in order to create a sense of order and balance in the world of this picture, and primarily to forge a sense of identity for the characters, as well as an environment that reflects what is happening on screen.

Dozens of shots from *Belle* could be paintings themselves. We are often looking at beautifully green and rich landscapes and gardens, ornate and detailed room interiors

and, of course, gowns and outfits that any person interested in fashion will relinquish in. These elements are some of the typical features of heritage films. But in this case, they are more than that. Costume design is a storytelling device of its own. We see that the Ashfords have usually a steel or cold blue wardrobe, to signify their cold and calculating personalities, since "blue is darkness made visible" (Cirlot 54). Conversely, Dido, Elizabeth and also Lady Mansfield have a tendency to wear brighter, warmer colours, like pink, purple and gold. In fact, the room where the two families gather after dinner,[68] which is featured in the background of the film's poster, is furnished in gold and pink tones, much like Dido's gown. Accordingly, "yellow (the attribute of Apollo, the sun-god) indicates magnanimity, intuition and intellect" (Cirlot 54). Amma Asante has herself pointed out these costume design details in an interview at Talks at Google.[69] Moreover, in her secret meetings with John, Dido always wears a dark outer garment, with a light coloured inside lining, or piece underneath it. This could be symbolic of the secrecy of their relationship, besides being a practical choice for not being noticed. In this way, dark, muted colours are to hide and camouflage, and lighter shades underneath the surface represent the joy, love and vivacity of the encounters, which must remain secret.

Firstly, we will look at the male characters in the film: Lord Mansfield, John Davinier and the Ashford brothers. William Murray, also known as Lord Mansfield, has two main fashion modes, which I connect to his two names. The toned-down William Murray is seen in a domestic environment, in which he is more relaxed and even without a wig (see fig. 47). In contrast, there is the dressed-up Lord Mansfield, who wears ornate clothes, normally in the presence of guests or in a professional setting (see fig. 48).

[68] This room will be referred to as Dido's room, from now on.
[69] See the Talks at Google interview at minute 16.

Fig. 47. (00:48:36) At the breakfast table with the family.

Fig. 48. (00:13:38) At the dinner table with the Ashfords as guests.

He literally and figuratively puts on a costume, to play the part of Lord Chief Justice of England. The duality in his dress code mirrors his identity, contrasting his

humbler origins with his current powerful position. In the third act, Lady Mansfield calls him out, for seemingly forgetting where he came from, and losing himself in the current luxury and status he worked so hard for:

> Lord Mansfield (Cont'd) – He is laughing at us! His childish campaign simply adds to my already rampant ridicule in the gossip pamphlets and now...!As though he were some kind of...saint, immune from reproach!
>
> Lady Mansfield – You said something identical, once. (Lord Mansfield stops in his tracks.) That you wanted to change the world! Quite some time before you entered your chambers, of course. Defiant, principled...driven. (off Lord M) Desperate to seal your position among the establishment but always a little too radical for them. (Sagay 85-86)

John Davinier is suitably simple in his costume, which ironically does not reflect his personality. A hopeful idealist aspirant attorney with radical views, John is very outspoken about his beliefs and is not afraid of confronting Mansfield in his own house, though his attire is humble and dark, and his clothes do not stand out in terms of colour, which draws us to his expressive face (see figs. 49-50).

Fig. 49. (00:21:20) John Davinier wearing an all dark brown ensemble.

Fig. 50. (00:28:54) John Davinier wearing an all dark blue ensemble.

As the son of a clergyman, luxurious fabric would seem odd for this character, as such the simplicity of his dress reminds the audience and Mansfield that what should truly matter about a person is who they are and not what they wear. Crucially, John's character

exists also as a mirror to Mansfield's youth, John being in reality a younger version of who the judge used to be, as John wittily remarks:

> Lord Mansfield – …but you have neither the rank nor finances for any more!
>
> John (tentative) – If I may, m'lord – neither did you!
>
> Lord Mansfield – I beg your pardon?
>
> John – Well...as a fourth son, you had rank but not the income to pay for your qualification to the Inns. (Sagay 26)

Conversely, the Ashford brothers, James and Oliver are always seen flaunting very ornate and intricate designs in their clothes. They often wear velvet, a rich fabric. The family wishes to project an air of sumptuousness, although they have financial difficulties (see figs. 51-52).

Fig. 51. (01:06:38) At a picnic James and Oliver wear their typical colour palette, Oliver (left) has a greenish velvet coat and James (right) has deep blue velvet coat.

Fig. 52. (00:15:49) Here we can see the embroidery on the vests of the Ashford brothers, as well as the ruffled bows on their necks.

Moreover, a comparison of these three very different men is in fact double-layered. The stark differences represent the class background of the characters but also their nature. John's simplicity of garments which reflects his honesty and lack of pretence. He has nothing to hide, therefore he has no need to conceal himself behind extravagance. Conversely, James and Oliver's clothes are ornate, made with lush fabrics, as a sign of hidden intentions behind a distracting façade of luxury. The *mise-en-scène* is particularly clever in this scene. Note how the Ashford brothers stand in front of a male nude statue with a leaf covering the genitals, while they judge Dido's attractiveness (see fig. 53). Oppositely, the sisters sit against a background of darkness. Moreover, in the first shot the two young men are centred within the frame around the male statue, whereas the two young women's heads are aligned with the two clothed female statues, on each side of the frame (see fig. 54). Hence, there is a rectangular shape formed by the four characters, in the shot. There is a line between Dido and Oliver and another line between Elizabeth

and James, signalling the not yet official love interests. This interesting placement and framing of the two couples is symbolic of their mindsets at this moment. The girls are in the dark in regard to the intentions of the Ashfords, who discuss their arousal, particularly stimulated by Dido, which can be seen as represented by the covered genitals – their desire in disguise.

Fig. 53. (00:15:57) James (left) and Oliver (right) meet Dido after dinner at Kenwood, they both red velvet coats, but James' is a slightly deeper burgundy shade.

Fig. 54. (00:16:15) Meeting the Asfords after dinner.

Focusing on the character of Dido, there is an element that is consistent throughout the film in her surroundings, flowers, specifically roses. They are deliberately present, as expressed by the director, in Dido's dresses and as actual flowers in different scenes, as for instance, in the triangular scene with Lady Mary and Elizabeth (see fig. 55), when she meets Davinier while posing for the portrait (see fig. 56) and at the Ashford garden (see fig. 57).

Fig. 55. (00:11:35)

Fig. 56. (00:29:34)

Fig. 57. (00:38:15)

Quite obviously, the rose is a symbol of beauty, femininity and romance. According to Iolanda Ramos, the rose is an English national symbol: "The British Isles, with England at their core, have a long tradition in building, or better saying, idealising, an identity as a privileged territory, a 'blessed plot' to borrow Shakespeare's words in *Richard II,* an 'other Eden, demi-paradise'" (100). This idea of England as a prosperous garden immediately brings to mind William Blake's Jerusalem hymn considered the non-official English anthem: "green and pleasant land". Furthermore, Ramos mentions the Tudor rose which was revived by Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen or Gloriana, as another symbolic use of the flower (101). The film references the rose firstly in dialogue, in the words of James Ashford (Sagay 20). From this moment on, the seed is planted in the viewer's mind, Elizabeth is equated with (white) glorious England. However, this is pictorially contradicted by associating the rose with Dido and not with her cousin. For instance, Dido often wears a dress with roses on a white background and is pictured walking through a field of roses at the Ashford estate. There is then perhaps a reversal

and denial of this white supremacist idea of pristine beauty, and an overall denial of it. In fact, I would suggest that *Belle* tries to turn beauty conventions on their head, whilst commentating on the double standard applied to women of different ethnicities. Culturally (even stereotypically) the white lady is a delicate but frigid flower, and the dark woman is the lustful exotic rarity. By visually applying the "English rose" trope to Dido, the film denies this bigoted ideology.

However, *Belle* never dismisses the fact that this prevailed at the epoch; in fact, the film seeks to show how deep rooted it was. Not shying away from the exotification of Dido, through the eyes of the Ashford family, the story also presents other male points of view which cancel it and manifest what seems to be the filmmaker's opinion on what true admiration and love should be. We have Lord Mansfield who, as the patriarch of the family, is presented as an extremely powerful compassionate man, whom Dido loves and defies. Mansfield is like an outsider within the establishment, and by the end of the film this status is proved. John Davinier, whom Dido married in real-life, is in the film used for romantic appeal. He may come off as the perfect love interest, but this should be attributed to the wonderful chemistry between the actors and the effective writing. The building of John and Dido's relationship is well constructed and does not come across as rushed or gratuitous, and this is due to the knowledgeable screenwriting, especially as this film is not based on any novel or play. Although Davinier may seem too idealistic and idealized, he is no doubt the type we would consider as the dream "catch" who respects a woman even when attracted to her. Yet, it is refreshing to find a male lead who is self-aware and actually has common interests with the female lead. This is not to say that Dido and John have it easy in the film, for their love is put to test and disapproved by a class-obsessed society. If nothing else, the love of Dido and John is a positive example of

mutual respect and friendship, which blossoms into an attraction built on a passion for justice and a desire for rebellion.

We now move on to an analysis of some technical aspects of the film, for the purpose of gaining insight about how the separate elements of filmmaking create a coherent whole. Regarding cinematography, *Belle* opens with a tracking shot at a high angle, giving the audience the impression of travelling from the sky down to the earth. We are entering the lives of the characters, as if were mere observants, birds flying down to see what is unfolding. The final shot of the film is also a tracking shot, but this time the camera moves away from Dido and John as they embrace each other in bliss, the couple has found their happy ending. As the camera pans away from them, we see behind the pair the building where the crucial verdict was given by Lord Mansfield, and eventually John and Dido become just two more figures on the street, they belong to the world and we must leave them now. Even if not aware of it, this technique gives us the sensation that we have witnessed reality unfold, the characters were there, before we began watching, and will continue to be, after we have left them. The audience is thus only a passing observer of particular circumstances in the lives of these people, providing a feeling of realism, since the film is not framed as fantastical or imaginative.

In terms of lighting, *Belle* is not a particularly bright overall, with indoor and outdoor scenes having a natural looking light, whereby some scenes can seem shadowy. Usually scenes depicting greater happiness and joy are well lit, but this is not always true. The scene where Dido and Elizabeth play in the gardens is green and bright, but many scenes of intimacy between John and Dido are often darker and with more muted colours, even taking place at night. I relate this aspect to the secrecy of the relationship, if their love must remain hidden in the dark, then so must the lovers. Furthermore, the couple being an inter-racial one, we may see the symbolism of colour and lighting connected to

the societal dislike for such unions, meaning that Dido and John could be weary of opinions on them, besides the fact that they are seeing each other behind Mansfield's back, and Dido as an engaged woman should not be alone with another man.

The score of *Belle* was composed by Rachel Portman. Portman is a British composer, whose work spans three decades, in British and American cinema. She is perhaps more well-known for becoming the first female composer to win the Oscar for Best Musical or Comedy Score,[70] for her work in the 1996 adaption of Jane Austen's *Emma*. Portman has since worked on other period films or films taking place in the historical past, like *Beloved* (Demme, 1998), *Chocolat* (Hallström, 2000), *Nicholas Nickleby* (McGrath, 2002), *Mona Lisa Smile* (Newell, 2003), *Oliver Twist* (Polanski, 2005), *The Duchess* (Dibb, 2008), *Bel Ami* (Declan and Ormerod, 2012), *Their Finest* (Scherfig, 2016), and *Race* (Hopkins, 2016). From this list, I underline a trend of working in costume dramas or heritage cinema, calling attention to *Emma*, *Nicholas Nickleby* and *The Duchess*, besides *Belle*, Portman has worked on two other race related films (*Beloved* and *Race*). Thus, Portman seems to be a pertinent fit to compose *Belle*'s musical score, as she was already experienced with heritage films, for which she is famous. This choice is, moreover, a calculated one, as *Belle*'s director Asante clearly stated she desired to make an *Austenesque* film. Having now some notions on the composer's background we can study her approach to the music of *Belle*. According to Portman's IMDb page, "Her film scores, usually dominant in strings and wind instruments, often have a lilting, almost magical quality to them". This trademark is indeed present in the soundtrack for *Belle*, in which Portman makes a selective use of violins, harps and clarinets, most noticeably. The most recognizable musical theme in the film is no doubt the track "Dido Elizabeth Belle",

[70] Portman was consequently nominated for the Academy Awards two more times. She was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Music, Original Score, for *The Cider House Rules* (1999) and for *Chocolat* (2000).

which serves as Dido's theme, and is present throughout the film. When listening to the soundtrack album, one can identify Dido's theme in nine out of the twenty-three songs: "Main Titles", "The Portrait Is Revealed", "Mirror", "Sitting for Portrait", "The Zong", "She Was Beautiful", "The Docks", "Let Justice Be Done" and "You Would Be My Wife". Naturally, in most of the songs, Dido's theme is often present in a modified manner, this means the recognizable melody and note progression is there, but with some changes, like in terms of tempo, and sometimes only part of the original track is used, as a swift but memorable hint in the music. However, in particularly poignant moments of the film this leitmotif stays mainly intact in its melodic culmination.

Apart from non-diegetic[71] music in the film, which is very present throughout, there is one significant instance of diegetic music in the film. The scene takes place after dinner when the Ashfords come to Kenwood. When they lay their eyes on Dido for the first time the trio, mother and two sons, are appalled by how "black" Dido is. The two brothers then proceed to share their thoughts on Dido's alluring beauty in a sexual manner. In the drawing room, while Elizabeth eagerly plays the piano and sings "On English Beauty"[72] as she smiles directly at James, Lady Mansfield quietly tells Oliver: "You will refrain from any intercourse with the negro. Lord and Lady Mansfield may find it fascinating to have a Lady Mulatto running around their household, but I will not have one running around mine!". To which her son replies "She is an heiress", and the screenplay mentions "a seamless change of heart for Lady Ashford" (Sagay 20). The following exchange thus happens:

[71] Diegetic sound is part of the action of the film, the environment the characters participate in. Non-diegetic sound comes from outside the action, only the audience is aware of it (*Critical Dictionary of Film and Television Theory* 186).
[72] See Johnson (31).

Lady Ashford – Although exceptions can be made.

Oliver – It is said that her father left her a rather vast fortune.

Lady Ashford – I mean to say, if that is your inclination.

Oliver – She is rather soft on the eye – I have thought no further Mamaa. (Sagay 20)

As soon as Elizabeth finalizes her performance, Oliver asks Dido to also play something for the group. Although reticent and shy, Dido sits at the piano after asking Lord Mansfield for permission. There is silence in the drawing room. The first loud notes of Handel's *Suite No.9* break the silence through Dido's elegant fingers: she can play, she can play better than Elizabeth. Without saying a word Dido astonishes the Ashfords and angers Mansfield. She plays so marvellously that Oliver cannot help but approach, fixated on her. Lady Ashford addresses Lady Mansfield "She is…most accomplished". Lady Ashford changes her perspective on Dido in a very short period of time. Initially, all she could see was a young woman who was black above everything. And this part of Dido was too loathsome for her to respect her. Then, firstly with the key information that she is rich and, and secondly, with her superior musical talent, Dido becomes someone who, in spite of being black, has some positive and profitable characteristics. Importantly, Lady Ashford creates all these judgements without addressing Dido or hearing her speak. it is music that speaks in this scene.

In the essay "Mute Music",[73] Michel Chion analyses music from the films *The Pianist* (2002, Polanski) and *The Piano* (1993, Campion) by comparing music with voice, and thus giving music speaking or communicative qualities. Chion writes:

[73] In *Beyond The Soundtrack* (2007).

> More generally, during the post-Beethoven period, European instrumental music, especially music for solo piano, was often twice mute. This repertoire often suggests unspoken words and imaginary lyrics-not only through the titles, but also through the *recitativo* and declamatory character of certain passages. (89)

This is clearly the case of Elizabeth's choice, since she is singing a poem by Hughes to which was added music composed by Pepusch, and the title of the work being "Cantata I, On English Beauty (recitative)".[74] We must note the title and subject of Elizabeth's chosen song, as a reference to her status of privilege as the "pure English rose" or stereotypical English beauty. Later on, in the essay, Chion associates music with muteness, for instance when the main character Szpilman, the Jewish pianist surviving in his destroyed city while escaping Nazi persecution in the Second World War, meets a German, the man who could and technically should send him to die, like the rest of his family. The officer tells him to play on an abandoned piano. A lover of Chopin, Szpliman choses the G-minor Ballade, a piece which Chion describes as "a series of notes struck violently from the highest to the lowest registers of the piano, resembling a sentence spoken with violent force…a struggle, the struggle of someone who strains against being gagged or against his own body" (92). The author is making a connection between the feelings and impressions the music played give about the situation and context of the scene. In this particular case, Szpliman is mute because he cannot speak, he has been silent for a long time and had restrained himself from playing on a piano he had found because of the attention it might attract. This tense encounter with the Nazi officer is bitter-sweet. Although, potentially deadly it gives the pianist a chance to finally play, and he explodes, expressing his frustration and despair, through the art from that defines him.

[74] See Johnson (31).

We can see a parallel between this scene in *The Pianist* and the drawing room scene in *Belle*. The officer does not turn Szpilman in, despite knowing he is a Jew, and Szpilman survives the Holocaust, while the officer dies shortly after. Dido, who initially was regarded as the last possible choice for a match with an Ashford becomes a prime target, because she surpassed expectations for her race. A Jew that can play and a black that can play, are ironic and puzzling judgements. In accordance, Fanon has noted the connection between discrimination against blacks and Jews – "Le peril juif est remplacé par la peur de la puissance sexuelle du négre" (*Peau Noire* 160) – as he refers that the Jew is linked with economic invasion and avarice, and the black with sexual invasion and debauchery. The contrast between the nationalistic and more monotonous performance by Elizabeth and the explosive yet refined performance by Dido, is critical. Moreover, Dido chose a German composer. A priori, one might think the first case to be more successful in that social environment, and certainly that must have been Elizabeth's logic. However, the latter case, while more unorthodox proved to be a head-turner, and above all, a statement of Dido's skill and intelligence, as she was confident in her abilities and did not belittle herself for the sake of humility. Finally, I underline the contrast between this piano scene in *Belle* and the piano scene in *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), where Elizabeth Bennet is asked to play and delivers an underwhelming performance, as she confesses she is not much of player or a drawer. It is interesting to see how Miss Bennet does not wish to abide by society's expectations of what a lady should be, something particular to her character, while Dido excels in these demands, perhaps to compensate for what others will see as problematic in her person.

This takes us to the underlying issue of race and music in this scene. In the essay "White Face, Black Noise"[75] by Krin Gabbard,[76] we find a fascinating reflection on how America uses and treats Jazz, considered a primarily African-American art form, in Hollywood, a rather white business. The author explains that Miles Davis worked on the music for different films. One of the films Davis supposedly participated in, *Street Smart* (1987, Schatzberg), was actually mainly the responsibility of keyboardist Robert Irving III, who decided what songs to use in the final product. In one scene, Davis's music simply stops and gives way to a familiar recording by Aretha Franklin. Christopher Reeve, playing a newspaper reporter, is interviewing a prostitute played by Kathy Baker. Although it is not the reporter's intention, he ends up having sex with her as Franklin's "You make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman" swells on the soundtrack, overwhelming the dialogue and Davis's doodling, which was already very much in the background.

> The introduction of the Franklin song at a crucial romantic moment in *Street Smart* is an excellent example of how the music of black Americans is recruited to sexualize the lives of white Americans in Hollywood films. ("White Face, Black Noise" 265)

Gabbard goes on to give other examples where similar musical placements happen, such as *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995, Eastwood), *Groundhog Day* (1993, Ramis) and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999, Minghella). This trend detected by the author can be linked to the stereotype of black people as more sexual, or hypersexual.[77] This source is chosen in order to contrast this way of thinking with the musical choice in *Belle*, as one that subverts and twists this trope. When a choice is made to depict a black woman playing

[75] Obviously, a play on the influential book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) by Frantz Fanon.
[76] In *Beyond the Soundtrack* (2007).
[77] See pages 89-90 of this dissertation.

a white German composer's classical music proficiently, undoubtedly the filmmaker is getting a message across that high culture is not only something for, or of white people. However, this can sometimes raise problems or at least curious observations. Recently, at the Royal Wedding of Meghan Markle and Prince Harry the cello player Sheku Kanneh-Mason was invited to perform.[78] His talent did not go unnoticed but neither did the fact that he was a black cello player. The South African comedian and host of *The Daily Show*, Trevor Noah, born of a white father and a black mother, pointed out jokingly how playing the cello was such a stereotypical white thing, [79] meaning that the only way for blackness to be accepted at a Royal wedding was through a typically white medium and, therefore, a more respectable one. Of course, this is a real issue in representation, the need to cling to Eurocentric or white standards of what is good or intelligent, as the only way to prove oneself respectable (Hall "Spectacle of the Other" 271).

Importantly, John is the character through which we see an appraisal of blackness as beautiful. He never degrades Dido's ancestry, instead he sees beauty in it. In spite of this, there is place for criticism, when a black woman comes to see herself as beautiful at least partly because a white man told her she is so (this being a possible interpretation of the film). However, *Belle* does not completely ignore this issue. Since Dido poignantly remarks, the first time she has a secret meeting with John, "must not a lady marry, even if she is financially secure? For who is she, without a husband of consequence? It seems silly – like a free negro who begs for a master!", to which he responds "unless she marries her equal. Her true equal – a man who respects her". Not getting married remains sometimes problematic for women in current western societies. If today being older and

[78] Sheku Kanneh-Mason was named BBC's Young Musician of the Year in 2016, and was the first black winner of the competition since its founding 38 years ago.
[79] See the video "'Prince Harry & Meghan Markle's Royal Wedding' Live at the O2 London - TREVOR NOAH".

single can be looked down upon, in the eighteenth-century it was much graver. The bias against unmarried women is evidence of a misogynistic view which regards women as men's property, because in a patriarchy worth is associated with men, therefore a woman needs to be associated with a man in order to have some type of worth. This concept gains deeper meaning when intersected with race, since in the context of slavery, a slave's social worth becomes linked to the master's ownership of the slave, not the self-value of the enslaved person. As such, Dido makes a mindful point when she compares the desperate single lady to a free negro begging for a master, as she questions why would one desire to be in chains, if not to obey hegemonic social standards.

6. Conclusion

To conclude this dissertation, I want to look at the present. Although *Belle*'s action takes place at the end of the eighteenth-century, the film was made in the beginning of the twenty-first. This is relevant because, as I have discussed, *Belle* inserts itself into a legacy of British cinema which is currently changing before our eyes. Slowly, the heritage genre is breaking new ground, as in, for instance, the dark comedy *The Favourite* (2018, Yorgos Lanthimos), where a lesbian love triangle involving Queen Anne of England, Scotland and Ireland, is at the centre of the narrative. Yet, although we find some "diversity" in terms of characters "a Southern/Home Counties version of white, middle-class and upper-class Englishness remains dominant" (*Film England* 251).

By looking at Great-Britain through the screen I believe we can find an identity in conflict. In order to understand what has become widely associated with Britishness or Englishness, and how this idea is biased, we can look to different sources. Many authors I have quoted, such as Robert J. C. Young, Lola Young, Catherine Hall, Stuart Hall and David Olusoga have written about the history of ideas regarding British culture whilst criticising it. Connecting this history to the film industry in Great-Britain is what actor and musician Riz Ahmed does in his essay "Airports and Auditions":

> America uses its stories to export a myth of itself, just like the UK. The reality of Britain is vibrant multi-culturalism, but the myth we export is an all-white world of lords and ladies. Conversely, American society is pretty segregated, but the myth they export is of a racial melting-pot solving crimes and fighting aliens side by side. (*The Good Immigrant* 162)

Ahmed is speaking of the creation of a nation, a country as a construct. As such, the films produced by the said nation should fit its idea of itself, or the idea of itself the nation wants to sell. The issue here is that Great-Britain's creation of itself excludes different communities, as Linda Colley remarks:

> If we look at Great Britain in this way, as an invented nation that was not founded on the suppression of older loyalties so much as superimposed on them, and that was heavily dependent for its raison d'être on a broadly Protestant culture, on the threat and tonic of recurrent war, especially with France, and on the triumphs, profits, and Otherness represented by a massive overseas empire, a great deal becomes clear. ("Britishness and Otherness" 327)

Accordingly, if at the origin of this "nation" is a dichotomy, Protestant instead of Catholic, white instead of black, it is because the hegemonic power determines that which it is not virtuous. In their article "Racism, Crisis, Brexit", Virdee and McGeever note "the presence of what we might term 'internal others' against whom the nation has often defined itself, including, most notably, racialized minorities and migrants" (1803). Accordingly, an important part of demolishing the prejudice at the origin of these biased nationalistic ideas is identifying them. In the Song *Englistan,* Ahmed references William Blake's Jerusalem: "All for a green and pleasant land/ All for a mean and pleasant land". Ahmed is thus condemning English society by means of a contradiction, calling England "a mean and pleasant land". The author points out the irony in England's supposed pleasantness, when in fact the country is ridden with internal conflict, specifically violence against minorities and immigrant communities. It is known that in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum there was a rise in hate crimes, as noted by Virdee and McGeever: "If confirmation were needed that the case for Brexit was intimately bound

up with questions of race, it was to be found in the wave of racist hate unleashed against migrants as well as the long-established black and brown British" (1808).

As I have tried to show through my analysis, *Belle* comes to put Britain's "white" identity in question, by reviving a black aristocrat from the nation's past and portraying her as a beloved figure. In spite of efforts to introduce black figures into national consciousness as valid participants in history, the conflicting notions of British, or English, identity have had dark consequences. In the event of the Brexit referendum of June 23rd 2016, we find traces of imperialist nostalgia, a desire to return to a so-called glorious past, embodied namely by heritage films. According to Andrew Higson, in film representation:

> […] England and Englishness has not changed a great deal: it is still white and Anglo-Saxon; the divisions between genders and between classes are still marked; propriety and good manners are still valued; romantic fulfilment can still resolve most problems; and England is still pre-industrial and picturesque, even if the picture is a little muddy round the edges. (*Film England* 173)

As such, it is not strange that the Leave campaign of Brexit was underscored by "a deep nostalgia for empire, but one secured through an occlusion of the underside of the British imperial project: the corrosive legacies of colonialism and racism, past and present" (Virdee and McGeever 1803). Interestingly, the supporters of Brexit in the UKIP party were mainly English and have shown that they identify as English instead of British (Virdee and McGeever 1811). Even when adding layers to the discussion, like the "English" versus "British" problem, this assessment by Stuart Hall does not cease to be true: "most definitions of 'Britishness' assume that the person who belongs is 'white'. It

is much harder for black people wherever they were born, to be accepted as 'British'" ("Spectacle of the Other" 230).

It appears that nations must come to terms with the diversity of their own heritage, without choosing which parts are more suitable. In fact, the reason why a character like Dido Belle has an identity struggle is precisely because her society only allows one identity element, or one label, for each individual. It is the same whitewashing or discriminatory selection that British culture seems to make of her own legacy, which affect individuals who do not conform to that identity. Amin Maalouf describes this phenomenon:

> Et lorsqu'on incite nos contemporains à "affirmer leur identité" comme on le fait si souvent aujourd'hui, ce qu'on leur dit par là c'est qu'ils doivent retrouver au fond d'eux-mêmes cette prétendue appartenance fondamentale, qui est souvent religieuse ou nationale ou raciale ou ethnique, et la brandir fièrement à la face des autres. Quiconque revendique une identité plus complexe se retrouve marginalisé. (11)

From this conflict arises what I have called the threshold identity, as it pertains to the story of Dido Belle who finds herself, as a black heiress in (Georgian) England, in an uncertain place. She is at the threshold, but to cross the threshold proves difficult.

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Appendix - Email received by the author from Amma Asante, director of *Belle*

Dear Mariana,

Thank you for your email.

On completion of making the movie BELLE, we partnered with book publishers Harper Collins, for a companion book to be written by historian and author, Paula Byrne, also entitled 'Belle'. This book was published at the same time as the movie theatre release of Belle, 6 years ago. This partner book obviously did not exist before I made the film, but harnesses much of the same research that I also pieced together when researching Dido, in order to write and direct the film. In addition, it contains the actual factual account of Dido Belle's life and is there to fulfil those factual elements of her life in as much detail as possible, for any audience member, who was moved to find out more about her and dig into the history that the film is based on, after being introduced to Dido Belle by the film. A dramatic movie for cinema, as you will know, is a different animal to a documentary film, (which BELLE is not), and also to factual books, alike, and must use elements of fiction to piece together the facts and history that the story is based on, usually in a closed window of two hours or less of screen time. This companion book to the film of 6 years ago, describes all of the information that you mention you have now come across in relation to your research for your dissertation.

With the exception of the painting of Dido and Elizabeth that we re-created for the film, all of the paintings that you see in the film, are not actual paintings that hung in Kenwood House. I, as the filmmaker, must choose how I wish to best exemplify a character's inner and outer world, as I have created it, in order to communicate it to an audience the story I want to tell. I must use metaphors, imagery, and all of the visual and audio elements that a film is able to harness in order to communicate to my audience a character's story and her emotions and I must carefully choose those elements based on the vision that I have for the film that I want to make . A character's emotions can only be fictionalised and presented as a filmmaker imagines them to be, since we have no written evidence of Dido's actual inner feelings and emotions. The paintings are examples of artwork of the time, positioning people of colour - Black people - as they were painted in comparison to white people at the time. They are used to present to an audience evidence of why the historic painting of Dido Belle with her cousin Elizabeth was ground-breaking in its time,

and though the other paintings are real and of the period, their significance in BELLE is only as far as for the purposes I have described above.

In relation to your dissertation, thank you for choosing BELLE. The request to interview me for dissertations is one that comes often and has done since the film's release. Regrettably, I am seldom able to fulfil these requests due to my schedule. However if you would like to contact Talia again in a few months, if it is not too late for you, I may be able to answer 2 or 3 questions via email.

With thanks and best wishes

Amma

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